

Women in Peace and Transition Processes

December 2018



Name of process

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement

Type of process

Peace-making

Outcome of the process:

- The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement ended over three decades of violence
- The Agreement introduced power-sharing (in an attempt to ensure bi-communal buy-in for devolved governance), but this served to keep Northern Irish politics highly polarized

Women's inclusion

- Direct representation at the negotiation table
- Official consultations
- Public decision-making
- Inclusive commissions

Women's influence

High influence on the negotiations due to:

- Proactively taking advantage of the selection criteria and procedures to ensure participation at the negotiating table
- Work to facilitate communication between parties
- Strong support for the ratification of the agreement by referendum

Northern Ireland (1996–1998)

The peace process in Northern Ireland from 1996–1998, culminating in the signature of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in April 1998, brought to an end more than 30 years of sectarian violence. Women's groups succeeded in securing the participation of a dedicated women's caucus—the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition—in the track one negotiations. Women successfully advocated for the inclusion of language and provisions in the final agreement on equal opportunity, women's rights to equal political participation, social inclusion, reconciliation and the needs of victims of violence, integrated education and mixed housing, and for a Civic Forum to engage with a broad range of stakeholders on the implementation of the Agreement. Women were also included in official consultations, played a key role in the “yes” campaign that succeeded in ratifying the Agreement by referendum, and were involved in post-Agreement commissions.

Women's influence on the negotiations was enabled by their communication and advocacy strategies and coalition-building efforts, which helped to earn them favor with the chairman of the talks and ultimately the Irish and UK governments, and by support from women from all community backgrounds. Their influence was constrained by the unfavorable attitude of other political parties and constraining attitudes regarding women's socio-political role more generally, a lack of broad public buy-in, and the heterogeneity of women's identities.

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I. Background

Since its establishment in 1921 as a constituent country of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland has been contested political terrain. The roots of the political and social division can be traced back much earlier, to discrimination by the British against Irish Catholics, exacerbated by the settlement of Protestants from Scotland and England in the northern province of Ulster in the 17th century, partially displacing the largely Catholic inhabitants and resulting in the political, economic, and social ascendancy of Protestant communities.¹ The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed after several years of guerilla warfare—including the 1919–1921 Anglo-Irish War—that followed the failed 1916 Easter Rising, divided the island of Ireland into two states: 26 predominantly Catholic southern counties became the independent Irish Free State (now Ireland), and six predominantly Protestant northern counties (most of the province of Ulster) remained part of the UK, as Northern Ireland.² Armed hostilities largely subsided, but underlying tensions over discrimination, poverty, political oppression, and aggressive policing remained.

These tensions came to a head in the late 1960s, with the emergence of a civil rights movement. The Royal Ulster Constabulary's (RUC) repressive reaction to the movement, and the surfacing of underlying tensions, led to violence. The start of the Northern Ireland conflict, known as the Troubles, is widely considered to be 5 October 1968, when the RUC's violent reaction to a civil rights march in the Bogside of Londonderry resulted in rioting, which quickly spread to Belfast.³ The British army was deployed in 1969. Violence escalated as both nationalist and unionist groups armed themselves. A violent paramilitary and military conflict ensued, opposing loyalist (unionist) and republican (nationalist) factions.⁴ 1972 saw almost 500 deaths, including high numbers of civilians. Fourteen civilians were killed by the British Army at an anti-internment rally in Londonderry on what has become known as Bloody Sunday, and support for the Irish Republic Army (IRA, the major republican paramilitary group) grew.⁵ Violence by both republican and unionist paramilitary groups continued until 1994, and the first Provisional IRA ceasefire.⁶ Between 1969 and 2001, an estimated 3,531 people were killed in Northern Ireland, and an estimated 50,000 injured.⁷

Society during the conflict has been referred to as a state of "armed patriarchy"

Society in Northern Ireland during the conflict has been widely referred to as a state of "armed patriarchy," underpinned by conservative, masculinized values and discourse of nationalism and religion.⁸ Societal and political attitudes were framed around national identity and the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional relationship with the UK;⁹ topics that were not directly related to this issue, such as women's rights and gender equality, were marginalized.¹⁰ The 2011 census in Northern Ireland recorded some 44 percent of the population as identifying as Ulster Protestant, and wholly or partly British, and 40 percent as Catholic, who identify themselves as Irish.¹¹

Women were situated as home-makers, wives, and mothers.¹² They were significantly, and specifically, impacted by the conflict, as it exacerbated hardship in both communities, including poverty, domestic violence, and single parenthood.¹³ The areas where the intensity of violence was highest correlated with areas of high social deprivation, and while Northern Ireland has a highly developed economy, closely connected to that of Ireland, Northern Ireland's council wards have consistently appeared among the UK's areas of highest social deprivation over the past half-century.¹⁴

Women's role in public life was mainly limited to community-based NGOs

Northern Ireland had very low levels of elected women representatives:¹⁵ women's role in public life was mainly limited to community-based non-governmental organizations.¹⁶ Women were heavily involved in civil rights and particularly local community work during the Troubles, advocating for peace and social change.¹⁷ Particularly prominent women leaders of the civil rights movement were Betty Sinclair, the first chairperson of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, and Bernadette Devlin from People's Democracy.¹⁸ Derry Peace Women and Women Together for Peace were among the groups set up to work for peace.¹⁹ The Peace People organized huge rallies in 1976 calling for an end to violence, and its founders, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.²⁰ Women were also heavily involved in peace-related community programs, alongside business and trade union leaders, who promoted the commercial advantages to be gained through a peace agreement.²¹

Over the decades of conflict, there was a series of formal attempts at reaching a constitutional settlement.²² While these attempts failed to resolve any major substantive issues, they laid the groundwork for the 1996–1998 process by improving and institutionalizing Anglo-Irish cooperation at the inter-governmental level, and reaching a consensus on the main topics and discussion strands future negotiations would address, including devolved democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, formal bodies dedicated to North–South relations (Northern Ireland and Ireland), and structures dedicated to institutional East–West cooperation (the United Kingdom and Ireland). The two Governments outlined these themes in a comprehensive set of proposals, the “Frameworks Document,” which served as a blueprint for the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.²³

In the early 1990s, there was increasing recognition that a stalemate had been reached; the IRA was not going to be defeated through military means, nor was it going to succeed in driving the British Government out of Northern Ireland. Secret contacts between the IRA and the UK Government, as well as talks between Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) leader John Hume and Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, and engagement of the Irish and US Governments, paved the way for the declaration of an IRA ceasefire in September 1994, with the loyalist paramilitaries following suit in October 1994.²⁴

In 1995, George Mitchell was appointed United States Special Envoy for Northern Ireland and President Bill Clinton visited Northern Ireland in an attempt to cement the

peace process. Mitchell initially headed the Independent Body on Decommissioning. The Body's report, produced in January 1996, recommended that the paramilitary groups' decommissioning occur in parallel with, rather than prior to, multi-party talks, and suggested selection criteria for talks, including the acceptance of six principles which would indicate the parties' commitment to non-violence, and the creation of an elected political forum, which would serve as a means of selecting the participants to multi-party talks.²⁵ In February 1996, however, the IRA ended its ceasefire with an attack in London.²⁶ As a consequence, Sinn Féin still contested the election to the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue (Mitchell's "elected political forum"), but was initially barred from attending the multi-party talks. The election was held in May 1996, and the Forum convened in June. The participants would agree the rules of procedure.²⁷

After all-night discussion and a 17-hour extension, the agreement was signed

The Opening Plenary of the multi-party talks ran from June 1996 to September 1997, with parties discussing procedural issues and the agenda for the substantive negotiations.²⁸ Elections in the UK in May 1997 and in Ireland in June 1997 catalyzed the peace process: the new Labour Government in the UK was better placed to temper the suspicions of nationalists in Northern Ireland about the UK Government's commitment to the process, and it had a more solid parliamentary base for engagement in the process; the new Irish Fianna Fáil government was in a better position to deal decisively with the republican movement due to its traditional association with the ideals of republicanism.²⁹ In July 1997, the IRA announced the renewal of its ceasefire, and Sinn Féin joined the multi-party talks. Substantive negotiations began in October 1997. After all-night discussions and a 17-hour extension of the deadline, the talks resulted in the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement on 10 April 1998.

The Agreement stipulated the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act, which claimed British jurisdiction over Northern Ireland, and the amendment of the Irish Constitution to remove its territorial claim on Northern Ireland and recognize Northern Ireland as part of the UK.³⁰ It confirmed Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the United Kingdom, but left open the possibility of a united Ireland (with the agreement of the majority of people in Northern Ireland). Both Governments accepted the right of citizens of Northern Ireland to declare themselves British or Irish, and to provide dual citizenship.³¹ The Agreement instituted a power-sharing arrangement: a 108-member Northern Ireland Assembly with legislative powers, elected by proportional representation from 18 constituencies, with a cross-party executive and a series of cross-party committees. It also set up mechanisms for North-South cooperation and East-West cooperation. The Agreement included provisions on the protection of minorities, policing and the judiciary, and decommissioning and security. Specific language and provisions were included on equal opportunity, women's rights to equal political participation, social inclusion, reconciliation and the needs of victims of violence, and integrated education and mixed housing.³²

The Agreement was ratified by a public referendum on 22 May 1998. It passed with 71 percent support (51–57 percent in unionist areas and 96–99 percent in nationalist

areas). The Agreement was also put to referendum in Ireland, due to proposed amendments to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution covering the right to be part of the “Irish Nation” and the goal of a unified Ireland, and passed with a 94 percent “yes” vote.

Northern Irish politics remained highly polarized, and there have been multiple collapses of the executive and suspensions of the Assembly. Renewed talks at St Andrews in 2006 failed to address these inherent weaknesses in the power-sharing arrangement. Policy disputes led to the latest suspension in January 2017, and several rounds of talks mediated by the UK Government have failed to resolve the situation. The result of the referendum in June 2016, on the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, has further complicated the situation.

Since the Northern Ireland peace process, women's representation in politics has grown

As regards the legacy for women, there seems to be a certain degree of consensus that since the Northern Ireland peace process, women's representation within the political landscape has improved.³³ In the 2016 Assembly elections, 28 percent of elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) were women, including the First Minister Arlene Foster, a significant increase from 19 percent in 2011.³⁴ The picture regarding women's rights and gender equality is more mixed. The increased representation of women in the political system has not led to significant policy changes towards increased gender equality, for instance on women's reproductive rights.³⁵ And while all political parties have produced multiple policy documents on women, references to women's rights have almost entirely disappeared from Assembly election manifestos.³⁶

Actors Involved in the Process

The UK and Irish governments were involved as mediators and as proxies for the different parties in Northern Ireland, and designed the format for the negotiations. The direct engagement of the United States in the negotiation process provided significant impetus towards a negotiated settlement.³⁷ President Bill Clinton invested heavily in the peace process, appointing a Special Envoy for Northern Ireland, working to establish an IRA ceasefire,³⁸ and also periodically intervening personally in the process; he was the first sitting US President to visit Northern Ireland, and called all of the main party leaders in the vital hours before the deadline.³⁹

Ten Northern Irish political parties, including the political wings of several paramilitary groups, were represented in the Northern Ireland Forum, and in the multi-party peace talks. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) represented the unionist and loyalist population. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and Sinn Féin represented the nationalist and republican population. The Alliance Party, the Labour Coalition, and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) were the only cross-community parties involved in the negotiations.

The talks were facilitated by US Senator George Mitchell, who was appointed senior independent chair of the negotiations and chaired the plenary format of the multi-party talks. His team included Canadian General John de Chastelain, who chaired two negotiating formats within the multi-party talks, and John Gorman,⁴⁰ who chaired the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue.

Women Involved in the Process

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was a cross-community political party formed in 1996, comprising women civil society and community leaders and activists. Existing political parties had not responded favorably to calls from women's groups to include more women in their delegations to the peace talks. As a result, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform—an international NGO working to facilitate and increase women's contributions to social, economic, and political agendas and campaign for women's equal civic and political rights—successfully lobbied the UK Government to include a women's caucus on the list of parties that would be permitted to contest the special election to the Northern Ireland Forum. Thus, the NIWC was formed.⁴¹

15 of the 110 elected members of the Forum were women

Fifteen of the 110 elected members of the Forum were women. In addition to the two members of the NIWC, the UUP included one woman in their 30-person delegation, the DUP included three (of 24), the SDLP three (of 21), Sinn Féin five (of 17), and the Alliance Party one (of seven).⁴² There was a markedly lower proportion of women among the delegates to the multi-party talks. Aside from the two NIWC delegates, Sinn Féin was the only party to name a woman—Lucilita Bhreatnach—as one of its delegates. It also included two women in its negotiation support team. Women were also among the negotiating teams of the Alliance party, the PUP, and the SDLP.⁴³

A number of women diplomats and officials from the US, the UK, and Ireland played leading roles in the Northern Ireland peace process: the US Ambassador to Ireland, Jean Kennedy Smith, and the US Consul General in Belfast, Kathleen Stephens; Martha Pope, the deputy to George Mitchell; the Irish Minister of State for Human Rights, Liz O'Donnell, who served as a representative of the Irish Government to the multi-party talks; the UK Ambassador to Ireland, Veronica Sutherland; the UK Northern Ireland Minister, Baroness Jean Denton; Helen Jackson, a member of the UK Parliament, who served as an observer; and the UK Secretary of State to Northern Ireland, Marjorie Mowlam,⁴⁴ who played a key role in the substantive section of the multi-party talks, working with all parties in search of compromise on a final agreement.⁴⁵

Highly organized women's groups played a mobilizing role in peace rallies

A number of highly organized women's groups played a mobilizing role in rallies calling for peace across Northern Ireland. These groups were not involved in the formal peace process (due to a lack of resources) but continued to operate at the local level, supporting their communities or reaching across communities within highly polarized spaces such as the cities of Derry and Belfast.

The NIWC focused on three core principles of equality, inclusion, and respect for human rights

This analysis will focus on the role of the women's group included in the formal process, the NIWC. The NIWC understood its role as advancing the likelihood of peace rather than the goals of one community. It sought to broaden the focus of the negotiations, and draw attention to the daily, human aspect of the conflict, giving a voice to the needs of women and certain marginalized groups, such as former soldiers and political prisoners.⁴⁶ As such, it focused on three core principles of equality, inclusion, and respect for human rights.⁴⁷ It aimed to ensure that the talks would be as representative as possible. The NIWC advocated for gender-balanced representation in any elected body created by the Agreement, and wanted the implementation of any peace agreement and future governmental structures in Northern Ireland to be supplemented by informal political initiatives in order to increase participatory democracy.⁴⁸ It initially advocated for a more inclusive electoral system, but failed to build sufficient consensus and ultimately decided to focus on other issues.⁴⁹ The NIWC also pushed for the creation of a Civic Forum, comprising business, trade union, and voluntary sector representatives, to be involved in implementation.⁵⁰ The NIWC's two delegates to both the Forum and the multi-party talks were Monica McWilliams (a Catholic academic) and Pearl Sagar (a Protestant social worker); other NIWC members sat on various sub-committees of the multi-party talks.

In the NIWC's opening statement at the negotiations, Monica McWilliams presented the NIWC's view that the peace process should include actors from many levels of society, both within and outside of the political arena: "It is crucial that we identify mechanisms that will enable and encourage local communities and various interests to participate in this process of peace building, and to feel a share of responsibility for the future of this society, rather than leaving this task exclusively to the owners of this negotiating table... We need to examine how we can bring all sectors of our society to a point where they feel that they are respected, and that they can associate themselves with the peace-building process."⁵¹

Modalities of Inclusion of Women's Groups

The modalities of women's inclusion⁵² in the peace process in Northern Ireland were: direct representation at the negotiation table as a separate women's delegation; official consultations, with two elected NIWC delegates in the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue; public decision-making, with the ratification of the peace agreement put to a referendum; and inclusive post-agreement commissions, with women participating in some of the commissions established by the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

1 | Direct Representation at the Negotiation Table

There was a two-tier process for the peace negotiations: the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, and a negotiating body. The six largest parties elected to the Forum designated three representatives to the multi-party talks, with a three-person support team, and the four smaller parties designated two representatives, with a

three-person support team.⁵³ The two Governments each had three representatives, with a five-person support team. Both the Ulster Democratic Party and Sinn Féin were temporarily barred from the talks due to ceasefire violations by their respective paramilitary wings, and the DUP and the UKUP permanently walked out of the substantive section of the multi-party talks upon Sinn Féin's admission in September 1997. The negotiating body met three times a week when in session. The talks were divided into five formats: the plenary (chaired by George Mitchell, and involving all parties), Strand One (dealing with issues within Northern Ireland, chaired by the UK Government, and not involving the Irish Government); Strand Two (dealing with relations within the island, chaired by General John de Chastelain, and involving all parties), Strand Three (dealing with UK-Irish relations, and involving the two Governments, with provisions for consultation with other parties), and a Business Committee (chaired by General John de Chastelain, and involving all parties).⁵⁴ There were additional sub-committees on confidence-building and decommissioning, in order to separate topics that risked undermining the parties' ability to cooperate.⁵⁵ Non-elected delegates could sit on the sub-committees, offering an opportunity to widen participation in the talks.⁵⁶

Decision-making operated on the basis of consensus. For instances where consensus could not be reached, the chair adopted the formula of "sufficient consensus," which stated that a decision could be made if a majority of both the unionist and nationalist delegate blocs were in agreement.⁵⁷ The negotiations proceeded on the principle that nothing was finally agreed in any format until everything was agreed in the negotiations as a whole. However, progress was slow. The chair brought forward the deadline for reaching an agreement to 9 April 1998, and this accelerated the negotiations.⁵⁸

The NIWC secured language and provisions in the agreement on all the issues it advocated for

The NIWC's two elected delegates to the multi-party talks were Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, and Bronagh Hinds coordinated NIWC representation on the Business Committee and sub-committees. In terms of substance, the NIWC aimed to expand the scope of the discussion to address women's rights and gender equality, victims' rights, the reintegration of political prisoners, education, and housing. The NIWC managed to secure language and provisions in the final agreement addressing all of these issues, largely in the chapter on "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity." Victims' rights and reconciliation proved to be key issues during the referendum campaign, suggesting that the ratification of the Agreement may have been less likely had these issues not been included.⁵⁹ It can also be argued that the expansion of the agenda beyond constitutional issues to include rights and safeguards ultimately made the constitutional settlement established by the Agreement more palatable to nationalists, and that, in turn, the constitutional settlement ensuring the future of the Union meant unionists were more amenable to accepting provisions on rights and safeguards.⁶⁰ However, in the 20 years since the Agreement, little concrete progress has been made in acting upon the provisions championed by the NIWC.

2 | Official Consultations

The 110-member Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue was primarily designed to serve as a pool for appointing delegates to the multi-party talks, providing a democratic mandate for parties to negotiate with each other.⁶¹ During the talks, the Forum was also intended to play a deliberative role, and met once a week in parallel to the multi-party negotiations. This consultative function was not successful: discussions were acrimonious and largely unproductive, especially in light of the withdrawal of a number of parties.⁶²

The majority of the Forum's delegates were elected in a special election

The majority of the Forum's delegates were elected in a special election, with five seats allotted per district (voters within each of the 18 districts selected one of several closed party lists). For the remaining 20 seats, a "top-up list" allocated two seats to the ten parties that received the largest overall number of votes. The final composition of the Forum was: UUP (30 seats); DUP (24); SDLP (21); Sinn Féin (17); Alliance Party (7); UKUP (3); PUP (2); UDP (2); Labour (2); NIWC (2).⁶³ Sinn Féin never took its seats, boycotting the Forum initially in protest at its exclusion from the multi-party talks due to the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire. The SDLP withdrew three weeks after the opening of the Forum in protest at the RUC's handling of a stand-off arising from a marching dispute,⁶⁴ and the UKUP withdrew in protest at the later admission of Sinn Féin to the multi-party talks.⁶⁵

3 | Public Decision-making

The referendum was carried out to garner popular legitimacy for the peace process. It took place on 22 May 1998, with 71 percent in favor of ratification.

Some consider the success of the "yes" referendum campaign directly attributable to the NIWC

Many women lobbied in support of the "yes" vote. The single-community parties, which had proved able to cooperate and compromise to a sufficient degree to reach the Agreement, were unwilling to cooperate on a referendum campaign due to the prospect of competing with one another only a matter of weeks later in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections (in the event of a yes vote).⁶⁶ As a result, civil society groups formed a "yes" campaign, in which women's civil society and community groups were heavily involved.⁶⁷ (A number of individual women, including Diane Greer, Geraldine Donaghy, and Fiona MacMillan, played key roles in the organization of the campaign and its communication strategy.)⁶⁸ The UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Marjorie Mowlam, considered the success of the "yes" campaign to be directly attributable to the efforts of the NIWC.⁶⁹ The NIWC coordinated with the civil society campaign, and played a leading role in lobbying and canvassing.⁷⁰ The "yes" campaign was a significant factor in shaping the opinion of key swing-voters—mainly moderate Unionists—in favor of supporting the Agreement.⁷¹

4 | Post-agreement Commissions

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement created several temporary bodies, including the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (also known as the Patten

Commission).⁷² The signatories to the Agreement also reaffirmed their commitment to the total disarmament of paramilitary organizations and their intention to cooperate with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, established in 1997.⁷³

Decommissioning in Northern Ireland was a closed process. The Decommissioning Commission was composed entirely of internationals and did not include women, and none of the monitors subsequently brought into the process were women.⁷⁴ In contrast, the Patten Commission was mandated to consult widely, and was able to design its own way of working. It took an inclusive approach, and carried out a series of public consultations that enabled women to come forward and participate. Two of the eight members of the Patten Commission were women, Kathleen O'Toole and Lucy Woods.⁷⁵ Kathleen O'Toole (a high-ranking member of the Boston Police Department) was particularly influential in drawing up the substantial reform recommendations proposed by the Commission.⁷⁶

The Patten Commission on policing took an inclusive approach that enabled women to participate

The Agreement also established a series of permanent bodies, which the NIWC strongly advocated for during the talks:⁷⁷ the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC); the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland; and a consultative Civic Forum on social, economic, and cultural issues.⁷⁸ Since their creation, the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission have had varying levels of women's participation.⁷⁹ Monica McWilliams served two terms as the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, from 2005 to 2011.⁸⁰ Both commissions have undertaken broad and inclusive consultation processes. The Civic Forum is widely seen to have resulted directly from the NIWC's advocacy.⁸¹ It was created in 2000 to consult with the new Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly, and met 12 times up to October 2002, when political institutions in Northern Ireland were suspended. However, it did not gain active support from other parties, and has not met since.⁸²

II. Analysis of Women's Influence: Enabling and Constraining Factors

The following section distinguishes between a number of process and context factors that either enabled or constrained the influence of women in the Northern Ireland Peace Process, explaining how and why women in Northern Ireland were able to assert influence on the negotiations and the subsequent implementation, as well as giving reasons for limits on their influence.

A dedicated women's caucus in the negotiations was a significant achievement in its own right

Women's groups and the NIWC capitalized on the opportunity presented by the selection criteria to secure the representation of a dedicated women's caucus in the negotiations, which constituted a significant achievement in its own right, given the marginalization of women in Northern Ireland from formal political mechanisms. The NIWC's communication and advocacy strategies and coalition-building efforts further enabled their influence over the negotiations, as did a number of external

factors comprising significant external support, the favorable attitude of the chair and ultimately the British and Irish Governments, and decision-making procedures. Women's influence was constrained by the unfavorable attitude of other political parties and attitudes regarding women's socio-political role more generally, a lack of broad public buy-in for the NIWC, and the heterogeneity of women's identities along sectarian and class lines.

Process Factors

1 | The Opportunity presented by Selection Criteria and Procedures

Women's groups were active in lobbying for inclusion in the talks, were successful in influencing the selection criteria and procedures for the negotiations, and capitalized on the opportunity these presented to secure women's direct representation at the negotiating table. Prior to the definition of the format for selection for the negotiations, the NIWEP advocated for a gender quota in the party-list system and circulated proposals to the UK Government.⁸³ The UK Government initially ignored these calls, and chose the parties that would contest the special election. In response to this and to the refusal of the established political parties to field more women candidates, the NIWEP lobbied both the UK and Irish Governments to include a women's caucus on that list, which the UK Government accepted, registering the NIWC as one of the parties.⁸⁴

The low quota for electoral success unintentionally presented an opportunity

The special election had a low quota for success, to ensure the participation of smaller political parties linked to paramilitary groups.⁸⁵ This format unintentionally presented an opportunity for other groups beyond the established political parties, which the NIWC seized. With assistance from a political scientist at Queen's University in Belfast, the NIWC calculated that if it could obtain 10,000 votes in the special election then it would have a chance of being elected to the Forum via the "top-up" list.⁸⁶ The NIWC thus set a goal of fielding 100 candidates across Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies, on the premise that if each one received 100 votes, the Coalition would reach the threshold necessary to win a place in the Forum.⁸⁷ The NIWC canvassed extensively, across communities, and won 7,731 votes, the ninth largest share, translating into two seats in the Forum, two delegates at the multi-party talks, and a 10-member support team (comprised entirely of women).⁸⁸

2 | Consensus Enabled Women's Influence

The consensus-based procedures enabled NIWC influence

The consensus-based decision-making procedures, although problematic, enabled the NIWC, as a participant in the all-party talks, to have their negotiating positions reflected in the language and substance of the talks. A voting system would have likely left them with far less influence, as it would have been less important for other parties' to take them into account. However, the sufficient consensus rule made for slow progress and was a source of frustration.⁸⁹

3 | Successful Coalition-building

The NIWC itself was a coalition.⁹⁰ The NIWC deliberately transcended the sectarian divide, and forming the NIWC required that women leverage their networks and skillsets to create a politically diverse membership: the candidates fielded by the NIWC in the special election for the Northern Ireland Forum came from a mixture of working and middle-class backgrounds, urban and rural areas, and from both unionist and nationalist communities.⁹¹ As one of the few cross-community parties that took part in the peace negotiations, the NIWC was also scrupulous in ensuring that its representation would be drawn from both unionist and nationalist backgrounds.⁹²

The NIWC sought to engage with all political parties in order to facilitate the negotiations

Once established, one of the principle aims of the NIWC was to build coalitions within the negotiations. It sought to engage with all political parties without favor or prejudice, in order to facilitate the dynamics of the negotiations and ensure progress.⁹³ This helped the NIWC achieve the aim of successful talks, but also got it closer to achieving its goals, such as broadening the agenda to include rights and equality provisions. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security conclude that the “relationship-building work that earned the NIWC a reputation as intermediaries was a key strategy to negotiating their goals in the Talks.”⁹⁴

4 | Effective Transfer, Communication, and Advocacy Strategies

The NIWC employed communication and advocacy strategies to further coalition-building. Its strategy to engage with all parties meant that it built trust.⁹⁵ It achieved this by developing personal contacts both in other parties and the mediator’s team, as well as using informal settings such as breaks to network.⁹⁶ The NIWC was seen as an honest broker by the two Governments and the mediators.⁹⁷ It bridged communication gaps between rival parties, and assisted back-channel communication, notably with Sinn Féin when it was barred from the talks.⁹⁸

The NIWC fostered and then took advantage of lines of communication

The NIWC fostered and then took advantage of lines of communication to the two Governments and to the other political parties to ensure that its proposals were included in the final agreement.⁹⁹ The NIWC transferred its preferences through lobbying behind closed doors, advocacy at the negotiation table, and public statements.¹⁰⁰ It suggested alternative language to other parties and the drafting team, making the NIWC’s proposals more acceptable to other parties without significantly altering their impact.¹⁰¹ It also repeatedly submitted thoroughly researched and carefully prepared policy papers and draft documents elaborated with community support, including regular meetings with NIWC members and constituents and the general public.¹⁰² These papers, along with those drawn up by other parties, served as a basis for substantive discussion in the final stages of the talks.¹⁰³

The NIWC was clearly highly successful in communication and advocacy from the very beginning. It had only six weeks between the publication of the list of parties that

would contest the special election to the Northern Ireland Forum, but nonetheless succeeded in winning enough votes—in a crowded field of more established parties—to take part in the negotiations. During negotiations, it maintained lines of communication with constituencies outside the talks to both inform and garner support for its proposals.¹⁰⁴ This was particularly the case regarding the Civic Forum, for which the NIWC canvassed support among the business community, trade unions, and the community and voluntary sector.¹⁰⁵ The NIWC also built relationships with specialist organizations and individual experts in order to enhance its technical expertise.¹⁰⁶

In its work for the referendum’s “yes” campaign, the NIWC took part in debates and public events, helped to prepare a “user-friendly version of the Agreement, using plain speech to make it more comprehensible,” and took advantage of its entitlement as a political party to free postage, to send one piece of literature to every voter—with its own message on one side of the leaflet and devoting the other side to the “yes” campaign.¹⁰⁷

5 | Attitudes of Conflict Parties

The UK and Irish Governments sought to make the talks inclusive, principally to ensure that political wings of the paramilitary groups involved in the conflict were represented during the negotiations. The overall focus on polarized unionist versus nationalist identities meant that gender equality does not appear to have been a priority. The UK Government initially ignored the appeal of the NIWEP for a gender-proofed party-list system, although it subsequently agreed to the NIWEP’s request to include a women’s caucus on the list of parties that would contest the special election to the talks.

However, during the negotiations, both the UK and Irish Governments appreciated the role played by the NIWC in facilitating dialogue and communication among the various parties and advancing the negotiations. Meetings between the NIWC and representatives of the UK and Irish Governments were productive, and the NIWC’s ideas and analyses were treated significantly more seriously by them than in the direct negotiations.¹⁰⁸ Members of both Governments have acknowledged the NIWC’s role as intermediary and in broadening the agenda.¹⁰⁹

A number of political party members displayed an aggressive, condescending, and insulting attitude to the NIWC

The creation of the NIWC had been precipitated by the refusal of established political parties to respond favorably to the NIWEP’s advocacy to include more women candidates in the special election to the Northern Ireland Forum, despite reasonably high levels of membership: in the 1990s, over 40 percent of the UUP and DUP membership were women, and over 40 percent of both Sinn Féin and the SDLP’s National Executive were women.¹¹⁰ Established political parties in Northern Ireland fielded very few women candidates for political office.¹¹¹ Indeed, a number of political party members displayed an aggressive, condescending, and insulting attitude to the NIWC, with “varying degrees of sexism and sarcasm”.¹¹² Various

parties—particularly unionist politicians—questioned the credibility and legitimacy of the NIWC representatives, on the basis that they had not been engaged in hostilities or active on the issue of Northern Ireland’s constitutional status.¹¹³ Unionists were suspicious of the NIWC’s proclaimed neutrality on the constitutional question, and opposed to the NIWC’s stance that decommissioning did not need to take place prior to the peace talks, and that Sinn Féin should participate in the negotiations.¹¹⁴ The atmosphere in the Forum was generally confrontational and unpleasant, but the hostility and derision the NIWC faced was particularly pronounced,¹¹⁵ with NIWC representatives described as “feckless”, as having “limited intellect”, and as the “hen party.”¹¹⁶

6 | Attitude of the Mediator

The NIWC built a good working relationship with the chair of the all-party talks, George Mitchell, and particularly his deputy, Martha Pope.¹¹⁷ This increased the level of the NIWC’s involvement in the final stages of the re-drafting of the Agreement, and the extent to which the Agreement reflected the NIWC’s positions.

7 | Funding

The NIWC’s work was enabled by significant funding from women academics and activists, women and men philanthropists, and other supporters, chiefly in Northern Ireland and the United States.¹¹⁸ NIWC representatives frequently travelled to the United States to give speeches at seminars, conferences, and fundraising events, sharing the NIWC’s negotiations experience.¹¹⁹ The UK Government also provided a financial allowance to all parties engaged in the negotiations in order to facilitate more equitable participation.¹²⁰

Context Factors

1 | Relatively Weak Public Buy-in

The NIWC generated enough support to win the votes it needed to be present at the negotiations. However, the 7,731 votes won by the NIWC represented only slightly more than one percent of the votes cast, and thus cannot be considered as evidence of far-reaching public backing.¹²¹ The entire process was framed by the question of Northern Ireland’s future constitutional relationship with the United Kingdom. The ethno-religious identifier dominated, even for those individuals or groups with an interest in advancing gender equality, meaning that issues outside of that scope and the constitutional question were often secondary priorities.¹²²

2 | Support for women, including from International Actors and International Women’s Networks

A number of prominent US political figures, including the First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, the US Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy-Smith, and Senator Edward

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Kennedy attracted international media attention to and support for the role of women in the Northern Ireland peace process.¹²³ In her capacity as co-chair (along with then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright) of the NGO Vital Voices—which identifies, trains, and empowers emerging women leaders and social entrepreneurs around the world—Clinton visited Northern Ireland in 1995 to help find a solution to the conflict, and publicly endorsed the role of women in the peace talks.¹²⁴

The Beijing Platform of Action shaped the NIWC's agenda

The NIWC was also influenced and supported by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the Platform of Action that it produced. The Platform of Action shaped the NIWC's agenda,¹²⁵ in particular the conclusions on women and power and decision-making, and the strategic objectives on access to and full participation in power structures.¹²⁶ The NIWC additionally drew on the experience of women in peace processes in Guatemala and South Africa, and shared information, experiences, and reciprocal moral support with women negotiators in the South African and Israeli-Palestinian peace processes, helping the Coalition to develop a strategy to effectively engage in the peace process in Northern Ireland.¹²⁷

Various individuals and organizations provided a range of forms of support to the NIWC, particularly during campaigning for the special election to the Northern Ireland Forum, helping to secure women's representation in the talks. Women's organizations and networks provided meeting places and held conferences and training events attended by NIWC members.¹²⁸ In 1998, Vital Voices hosted the Women in Democracy conference in Belfast, which brought together 400 women, who built relationships and secured resources in support of women's activism in Northern Ireland.¹²⁹ Calculations by an expert in election analysis from Queen's University provided assistance in strategizing for the special election.¹³⁰ The NIWC also received assistance in drafting documents,¹³¹ and an anonymous donation and the generosity of "politically sympathetic printers" covered the cost of a bulk order for printing campaign materials.¹³²

3 | Preparedness of Women and Strong Links to Women's Groups

The majority of the NIWC's members were involved in diverse sectors of informal politics, from the women's rights and civil rights movements, to community engagement, peace and education, and voluntary work and civil society.¹³³ The NIWC successfully leveraged the experiences, skillsets, and networks established through this prior work, incorporating members with diverse skills and expertise, including in electoral systems, policy drafting, media, trade unions, volunteer organizations, and mediation.¹³⁴ The organizational management and community action backgrounds of NIWC members also meant they had experience of the process and dynamics of negotiations.¹³⁵ The role of women in efforts to maintain social cohesiveness during the Troubles meant the NIWC representatives were among the most experienced peace negotiators at the talks.¹³⁶

The NIWC successfully leveraged the experiences, skillsets, and networks of its diverse membership

4 | Heterogeneity of Women's Identities

While most of the women's groups present at the initial discussions on the formation of the NIWC supported the idea of a cross-community women's party, some believed it would be difficult to sustain the bi-communal nature of the Coalition when it came to extremely contentious issues (for instance, policing) because cooperation would require too many compromises.¹³⁷ It was challenging for NIWC members from different religious, cultural, and political backgrounds to overcome their divisions and reach agreement on sensitive issues.¹³⁸ Cleavages did emerge within the Coalition, in relation to issues such as the release of political prisoners, which was perceived differently by women from different class backgrounds.¹³⁹ The rural-urban divide also became challenging, in spite of the efforts of core members of the NIWC to maintain the party's connections across all of the regions of Northern Ireland, because of the negotiations' focus in the capital.¹⁴⁰

It was challenging to reach agreement on sensitive issues, and divisions did emerge

Nevertheless, the NIWC successfully formulated a shared agenda, and was faithful to its identity as a cross-community party by ensuring that its delegates and its representatives contained members from both a nationalist and a unionist background.¹⁴¹

5 | Constraining Attitudes and Expectations Surrounding Societal Gender Roles

Northern Ireland's political culture was largely closed to women's formal political participation: according to Molinari, women were absent from political life in Northern Ireland because of family responsibilities, conformity to a strict code of sexual division promoted by the churches, a first-past-the-post electoral system that was unfavorable to women and minority groups, the weight of incumbency, and the absence of positive action mechanisms.¹⁴² Conflict in Northern Ireland marginalized issues such as women's rights and gender equality, and the conflict and its impact had been framed in such a way that only actors directly involved as combatants were deemed relevant and competent to address its resolution.¹⁴³ In this light, the NIWC's formal participation in the track one negotiations was an extraordinary exception to the status quo.

III. Conclusion

Women, specifically the members of the NIWC, were by no means the primary actors of the peace process, but they played a key role as facilitators, helping to advance the talks by maintaining channels of communication among rival parties, lobbying for the talks to be inclusive, and advocating to find common ground. Drawing on its members' strong grounding in community organizations and civil society, with extremely limited preparation time, the NIWC managed to ensure participation in the negotiations and was successful in broadening the agenda to address reconciliation and greater inclusion of marginalized groups. It successfully pushed for the inclusion of language and provisions on human rights, victim's rights, mixed education and housing, equality of opportunity, and women's rights in the Belfast (Good Friday)

Women were by no means the primary actors, but played a key role

Agreement. Moreover, the inclusion of victims' rights and reconciliation in the Agreement, and the NIWC's work on the "yes" campaign, arguably contributed to its successful ratification.

Lack of progress regarding provisions championed by the NIWC is symptomatic of the Agreement's focus on constitutional issues

However, despite the inclusion of the provisions championed by the NIWC, little substantive progress has been made in the 20 years since the Agreement. This is in part due to the lack of specific mechanisms guaranteeing these rights. But the lack of progress is chiefly symptomatic of the fact that the Agreement's focus on addressing the sectarian conflict and constitutional issues overshadows all other issues. In terms of the specific provisions lobbied for by the NIWC, in 2013, 93 percent of children in Northern Ireland still attended segregated schools.¹⁴⁴ Equality legislation in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom.¹⁴⁵ While women's participation in formal politics has increased in the two decades since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, with women currently leading the two major political parties, the socio-political landscape in Northern Ireland is still dominated by men and there remains a lack of attention to women's rights.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is still a lack of social infrastructure, such as a state-funded childcare strategy, to facilitate full and equal political participation.¹⁴⁷

The NIWC's participation in the talks increased the level of attention paid by other parties to gender equality and women's participation in the immediate aftermath of the negotiations. Most significantly, in a heavily masculinized socio-political context, the prominent involvement in the negotiations and media presence of a party composed entirely of women debunked the myth that women were unwilling or unable to effectively contribute to formal politics, and began to integrate women's participation into the political culture in Northern Ireland.¹⁴⁸ As for the Agreement itself, in spite of setbacks in implementation, it has endured, and has served as a framework for constructive political engagement.¹⁴⁹

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- 139 Molinari, “Putting Women in the Picture,” 116.
- 140 Chang et al., “Women Leading Peace,” 44.
- 141 Fearon, “The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition,” 5
- 142 Molinari, “Putting Women in the Picture,” 111.
- 143 Wilford, “Women and Politics in Northern Ireland,” 42; Nino Freuler interview with Goretti Horgan, 30 October 2017.
- 144 Chang et al., “Women Leading Peace,” 49.
- 145 Nino Freuler interview with Goretti Horgan, 30 October 2017.
- 146 Ibid.
- 147 Ibid.
- 148 Cowell-Meyers contends 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.” Cowell-Meyers, “The Social Movement as Political Party,” 69.
- 149 Nolan-Haley and Hinds, “Problem-Solving Negotiations,” 399.

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Women in Peace and Transition Processes

Case studies in this series are based on findings of the “Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation” research project (2011–2017), a multi-year comparative research project led by Dr. Thania Paffenholz at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. The Broadening Participation project examined how and under which conditions various actors participated in and influenced peace and political transition processes. The project’s dataset comprises 40 mainly qualitative case studies of negotiation and implementation processes, covering 34 countries, and ranging from 1989 to 2014. These cases are categorized according to a range of groups of included actors and a framework of seven inclusion modalities developed by Thania Paffenholz. Among the case studies under review for this project, 28 included measurable involvement of women. In this context, women were defined as relatively organized groups, including delegations of women, women’s civil society organizations, coalitions or networks, which sought inclusion in peace negotiations and the implementation of agreements. The project did not investigate the role of women as mediators. For more information, see: www.inclusivepeace.org

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The Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (IPTI) is dedicated to evidence-based research and its transfer to policy and practice. The objective of the initiative is to support sustainable peace by providing expertise and information on the inclusion of diverse actors in peace and transition processes. This expertise is drawn from a collection of research projects that have been conducted for nearly a decade at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva under the lead of Dr. Thania Paffenholz.

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**IPTI, Graduate Institute
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2
1202 Genève**

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