

# The role of women in post-conflict societies remains an unfinished project.

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/06/18/the-role-of-women-in-post-conflict-societies-remains-an-unfinished-project/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/06/18/the-role-of-women-in-post-conflict-societies-remains-an-unfinished-project/)

18/06/2013

*Some feminist authors have argued that peace settlements have the potential to perpetuate gender inequality by privileging communal unity over the rights of women. [Bernadette C. Hayes](#) and [Ian McAllister](#) assess this perspective in the case of Northern Ireland. They find that while the 1998 Good Friday Agreement contained provisions for gender equality, it was primarily framed around national identity. This may explain why significantly fewer women in Northern Ireland are supportive of devolution than men.*



Institutional design is generally seen as the most viable approach to resolving communal divisions in post-conflict societies. In principle, this approach enables communities with conflicting ethnic or religious identities to overcome longstanding antagonisms. New institutions provide an opportunity to create a political discourse based on mutual accommodation rather than conflict and division.



How do women fare under such arrangements? Feminist scholars have [pointed](#) to the role of peace settlements in perpetuating gender inequality. They argue that power-sharing political arrangements sacrifice women's claims for equality in the interests of communal unity. Such arrangements can also encourage ethno-national groups to further perpetuate their own sexist ideologies.

National liberation movements run the risk of subordinating the social struggle to the national one. Women and feminists are silenced both by the 'masculinisation' of the peace process and by the desire by men to re-establish their pre-war prerogatives of domination. Most peace agreements are negotiated exclusively by men and they often reinforce male privilege at the expense of gender equality. Even women who were active participants in the national struggle are ill-served by such negotiations.

Our research on public opinion following the [1998 Northern Ireland Agreement](#) largely confirms these expectations. The Agreement was ratified by 71 per cent of citizens, formally ending almost thirty years of violence. For the first time, representatives from both religious communities came together to endorse an elite-driven political accommodation designed to recognise their differing traditions.

The new assembly and its power-sharing executive held out tremendous hope. The assembly also coincided with an influx of women into elected office: out of 108 members elected in June 1998, 14 were women, two of whom were members of a women-only political representative party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. The electoral success of women also translated into significant ministerial power: three of the 10 ministerial positions were held by women prior to dissolution in October 2002.



Northern Ireland Assembly, Credit: Lofty (CC BY 2.0)

The unique role of these female elected representatives as bearers of a new consensus politics was reflected in the attitudes of the newly elected assembly members. They placed much of the responsibility for the transition to peace on the women themselves. By focusing on issues such as health and education, it was hoped that women would negate the tribalism of the past and create consensus and mutual accommodation. The gender-based assignment of responsibilities and committee membership within the assembly strongly reflected this belief.

But despite early promise, much of the history of the assembly has been mired in acrimony. The new assembly remained highly patriarchal in nature, with its female members subject to widespread heckling and verbal abuse. In particular, a Sinn Fein minister, Barbara de Brun, was singled out for much abuse by unionist politicians, although almost all non-unionist women were exposed to inappropriate sexist remarks at some stage. While efforts were made to unite the female members through a cross-party women's caucus, the primacy of party position and communal identity undermined such initiatives.

To what extent did the highly sexist approach to communal relations within the assembly translate into gender difference in levels of popular support for the new institutions? Using the 2010 Northern Ireland Election Survey our results show that, regardless of religion, men are consistently more supportive of devolution than women. The findings also show that the gender gap operates differently between the two communities. Among Catholics, it is the effectiveness of the new institutions that shape the gender gap in political attitudes. Among Protestants the gap is largely attributable to levels of political engagement.

What explains these differences? One explanation is the differing responses of the political parties to the conflict and to the political role of women. For unionists, the maintenance of the union was paramount with women's political activity relegated to a support role. Among Catholics, the goal of political activity has been to gain equal representation in the political institutions.

These findings have several implications for post-conflict societies. First, peace studies must address the relationship between conflict resolution and gender. As feminists argue, the concept of nationalism is highly gendered and regressive in nature. Second, greater recognition must be given to negotiating gender and national identity in post-conflict societies. Finally, placing women in peace negotiations is not enough. Attention must also be paid to the role of women in the transformation of post-conflict societies. The role of women in post-conflict societies remains an unfinished project.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/12LrQor>

---

## About the authors

**Bernadette C. Hayes** – *University of Aberdeen*

Bernadette C. Hayes is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen. Her most recent books include (with Ian McAllister) *Conflict to Peace: Politics and Society in Northern Ireland Over Half a Century* (Manchester University Press, 2013), and *Conflict and Consensus: A study of attitudes and values in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2006, co-author).



–

**Ian McAllister** – *Australian National University*

Ian McAllister is Distinguished Professor of Political Science in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University, Canberra. His most recent books include (with Bernadette C. Hayes) *Conflict to Peace: Politics and Society in Northern Ireland Over Half a Century* (Manchester University Press, 2013), *The Australian Voter: 50 Years of Change* (University of NSW Press, 2011), and *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage* (Cambridge University Press, 2011, coauthor).



-