Power,
Politics,
Positionings

Contents

Preface

This is the fourth report from Democratic Dialogue, the Belfast-based think tank.

Further copies are available from the address on the inside front cover, price £7.50 (£10 institutions, £4.50 unwaged) plus 10 per cent postage and packing.

DD aims to publish several reports per year. Readers may wish to return the enclosed subscription slip, to avail of reduced-rate payment for reports, free copies of DD's newsletter and notification of all DD events.

We are open to requests to organise debates or discussion groups around any of the themes or ideas raised in this, or indeed other, reports. Again, the contact number is on the inside cover.

Our next report will explore another theme salient to the reinvigoration of public life in Northern Ireland—developing dynamic relationships with the European Union, now once again on the verge of change. DD

Introduction

Kate Fearon

The nature of the political is in constant flux. So too are the loci of power.[1] What remains constant is that women, while no less likely than men to be politically active,[2] have much less access to political activities associated with power.

These—mainly institutional—activities are male-dominated, even monopolised. Other—non-institutional or even anti-institutional—activities are empowering to the individual, but the ability to exert influence and assert change, over and for others, is limited.

As long as men operate a monopoly on power, the nature and distribution of that power will not alter. The monopoly must be challenged by those who hold it, and by those who should share in its distribution.

We all know how badly women are represented in politics, and the statistics for Northern Ireland can become slightly flat: no women parliamentary or European representatives and only 12 per cent of district councillors; two women members of the old Northern Ireland parliament and one woman Westminster member in 75 years.

The first four chapters of this report seek to probe these figures a little more deeply, taking into account the cultural and policy contexts which produce such a dearth of female representation. The opening chapter presents the policies of political parties on a sample range of issues of direct relevance to women—for example, candidate selection procedures, divorce, domestic violence and education—as well as examining how women in the parties fared in the recent Forum elections, and what politicians in the region thought of the newly formed Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.[3]

Political parties do draw support for their assumptions from media mindsets.

Liz Fawcett challenges the regional media on the images they promote of women, using the treatment of Hillary Clinton on the presidential visit last November and the reportage surrounding the opening of the 'School Dinners' restaurant in Belfast to illustrate her case.

Looking to areas where women are particularly active, Roisín McDonough asks to what extent it is desirable or possible to transfer good practice from the community and voluntary sector to the business of government.

Mindful that Northern Ireland politicians are once more engaged in negotiations, Eilish Rooney casts a critical eye over documents proposed in the past, and likely to form some part of the future. The Framework Documents, she argues, are already conceptually weighted in favour of male operators. What might this mean for women's participation in any future arrangements?

It is to electoral arrangements that Rick Wilford turns. Which systems of election produce best representation of women, and why? And why, when women participate so actively in civil society in Northern Ireland, do they so rarely appear prominently in political life? Are *they* backward—or is it the parties, ostensibly enticing them to come forward?

Deirdre Heenan and Anne Marie Gray expand on the potential lessons from international practice. While there are major theoretical difficulties as to whether and how 'women's interests' can be construed, they conclude that there is a gathering body of evidence which suggests that the feminisation of political decision-making does make a difference to policy outcomes.

Much has been written[4] on the legitimacy of the representation of 'organic' or 'sectoral'[5] interest groups—such as women—in a liberal democracy. This report does not purport to contribute to that particular debate: we are concerned with identifying and suggesting practices that might render it absolutely academic.

Nor, in asserting the rights of such a gender-specific organic grouping to participate in more formal politics, and to transfer some of their current practices to it, does this report view the category 'woman' as a homogeneous unity. On the contrary, we recognise that within it lies a multiplicity of real living women who do not share an identical experience.[6]

But the overarching commonality in all these sites of multiplicity and difference is that, as Eilish Rooney elaborates, women are subordinate to men. This report seeks to suggest how this paradigm could be most effectively challenged in Northern Ireland. ▫

Footnotes

[1] See, for example, John Morison, 'Waiting for the big fix', in DD report 3, *Reconstituting Politics*, 1996

[2] Using a radical definition of political participation, Robert Miller, Rick Wilford and Freda Donoghue report (*Women and Political Participation in Northern Ireland*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996) that the sex of an individual rarely emerges as a cause of increased or lowered political activity.

[3] The author declares an interest. She was involved in the running of the NIWC campaign, and stood as a candidate.

[4] Heenan and Gray point to some of this in their chapter. Further references are to be found in the footnotes to Rick Wilford's piece.

[5] Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: a defence of the rules of the game*, Polity, Cambridge, 1984, p51

[6] Ann Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, 1993, chapter 3

Painting the picture

'In support of her man'

Kate Fearon

Most of the parties which have been involved in the negotiations at Stormont are defined solely in terms of their relationship with the union—whether they favour its defence, its dilution or its disbandment. But people cannot survive on the state of the union alone.

So what do the parties say about issues of particular relevance to women, inside and outside their organisations? And how did women in the parties fare in the election in May to the Northern Ireland Forum?

Fig 1 shows the number of women on the executive bodies of the Northern Ireland parties (excluding the Democratic Unionist party and the UK Unionist party, which failed to respond to requests for information).

All the parties said that women organised autonomously within them, via 'women's groups' or 'women's forums'. But the role such a body plays varied slightly: in some parties it is a lobbying group, with an agenda for increasing the profile of women in the party; in others it is a space for women to discuss issues they identify as important. None, however, appears to have a direct input to policy formation, though their members may sit on policy-making bodies.

Broadly speaking, the parties also favour childcare in some form. The Ulster Unionist party, while supporting provision at educational institutions and in the workplace—including tax concessions for employers as an incentive—fails to provide childcare at its annual conference. Alliance takes a similarly equivocal stance. It has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, providing for a child-centred approach to welfare, but it no longer provides childcare at conference—due to 'lack of demand'. The Social Democratic and

Figure 1: party executives and women executive members

Labour party does offer conference childcare, and claims repeatedly to have lobbied government for a statutory right to nursery education for all.

Sinn Féin has provided childcare at its ard fheis (conference) since 1982. It is party policy to have similar provision at all meetings of SF, regardless of level or frequency. Externally, it supports a wide-ranging policy, including workplace childcare and free nursery education. The Progressive Unionist party also provides childcare at its annual policy-making meeting. It supports workplace crèches to help working mothers and single parents take up employment. The Ulster Democratic party believes childcare is very important, and also plans to introduce a crèche at its conference.

On some human rights issues the parties take more divergent positions. As regards abortion, for instance, the UUP and the DUP are opposed in any circumstances, but the SDLP, while opposed to the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act from Britain, does recognise the "deep-rooted social and economic reasons for abortion and the need to address these issues". Alliance doesn't have policy on abortion: there is no party whip on matters deemed to be of private morality.

The PUP supports a woman's right to choose and acknowledges an individual's right to control one's own body, irrespective of marital status; it calls for extension of the 1967 act. While not endorsing extension, SF policy replicates the wording of the UK legislation, supporting the need for abortion where there is a threat to the mental or physical health of women, and in cases of rape or sexual abuse. SF also supports non-directive counselling and advice on all choices made by women. The UDP has no formal policy on the matter, but the party leader has confirmed that there would be circumstances in which abortion was a necessary option.

Both the SDLP and SF argue for a redefinition of what constitutes rape. The SDLP believes the crime should be redefined to cover a cover a number of attacks currently bracketed under the 'lesser' offence of indecent assault. It also calls for objective assessment of the victim's consent to a sexual act, based on the judgment of a "reasonably minded person"—the current position is that a man has a defence if he can convincingly say he believed the woman consented. SF is very specific as to the type of activity it wants defined as rape: intimidation with threats or weapons, beating, choking, knifing, sexual and mental humiliation, forced oral sex and use of weapons to penetrate women. Neither the UUP nor the UDP has specific policy on rape and sexual assault. The PUP calls for a

strengthening of the law in relation to rape and all forms of sexual assault and is woman-oriented insofar as it supports more services for victims.

It adopts a similar approach in its domestic violence policy—a strengthening of the law, and more services for women. The UUP does have policy on domestic violence, focusing on post-abuse care: simplification of arrest, charge and prosecution procedures. Like the SDLP, it calls for increased funding for victim support, rehabilitation and refuges. The UDP takes a slightly different perspective, looking to what happens before cases reach the police or courts, if ever. It feels strongly that women and men should be involved in combating domestic violence, though it does not specify how this might be done. While Alliance has no policy on domestic violence, SF has a very detailed policy, which locates the issue in the wider political framework. Again support structures feature, along with, like the UUP, reform of the police and court services. But it further recognises difficulties in those areas where prompt police action may not be an option for women. It does not expressly advise women not to go to the police for help but, if women do fear this option, uniquely among the parties it reports that it will conduct referrals to statutory agencies, other women and "community support services".

All the parties recognise that the status and visibility of women in their party is, if not cause for concern, then cause at least for some activity to address it. Some are more conscious of the journey yet to travel than others. Alliance is consulting women in the party informally, and will encourage more to stand in elections. It notes that over one third of its council candidates in 1993 were women (there are 12 female Alliance councillors), but it has no plans for positive discrimination. The SDLP has also set in place "structures to improve the visibility of women in the party at public levels". The issue of promoting visibility without concomitant status concerns SF internally. Often, it says, women can have visibility, and no status: it is important to have status to prioritise internal positioning and decision-making positions for women. It believes that it has gone some way down the road, but admits there is still a major way to go. The UUP is more upfront and states quite simply that women's position in the party should be enhanced, as should the roles they assume in the party.

Given that the parties recognise that there are numerical and positional problems facing women in their own parties, what mechanisms, if any, do they employ to redress the imbalance?

Policies on equal opportunities tend

to be housed in two strands, which can be mutually inclusive. They look into party structure or outward to society in general. Alliance is committed to full equality of opportunity and opposes all forms of discrimination on grounds of gender, religion, disability and so on. It has no special measures to oppose gender discrimination in its own party, unlike the SDLP, SF and the PUP, who operate quotas for women on their executive bodies. The SDLP also demonstrates an appreciation of the wider issues, supporting affirmative action programmes to promote education, training and recruitment of women into areas of employment previously closed to them. It further advocates training courses aimed at young unemployed women, and more flexible working arrangements. The PUP shares this appreciation, focusing its childcare policy on women's employment or return-to-work opportunities. SF expands the policy further, looking to secure equality of opportunity in health and education. It too has quotas for women on the national executive and on all committees.

The UDP is more concerned purely with its party structures, seeking to attain equal members of women in the party. The UUP has no explicit provision for quotas, though effectively its Women's Council[1] provides for a limited recognition of this principle, even if it does not provide for its application. The party's equal opportunities policy is not concerned with its internal structures. Rather, it looks out to public agencies and 'monitoring' of the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Fair Employment Commission.

All the parties, with the exception of the UUP, additionally offer training to women in public speaking. Thus all the parties recognise, to varying degrees, that some gender-specific measures are necessary to increase the status and visibility of women in their parties, and at least some of them go some way to

addressing this reality.

This tentative understanding is not carried forward to selection methods, however. All special measures for women fall off at Westminster level. Alliance claims that "many and varied skills" are required for the prospective Westminster candidate, and holds open competitions by election in both constituency and council selection meetings. The SDLP, too, favours a formal selection convention method—the 'personal approach' is not used, but the candidates should have extensive knowledge of the needs of their constituencies and experience of working for the community they wish to represent. SF also feels it important that there are no 'parachute' candidates—people have to be involved at the 'community level' to stand for SF. It uses a combination of the 'personal approach' and open competition by election process to select its candidates for Westminster. The UUP states simply that selection is open to any member, which suggests that persons thinking about contesting an election must volunteer themselves to the appropriate authorities within the party. This is also true of the UDP, where persons volunteer themselves to the party.

But there seems little point in volunteering oneself for a process unless one has the skills deemed by the parties to be appropriate and desirable. These invariably include some or all of the following, which form the core of the SDLP, Alliance, SF and UDP requirements: knowledge of and ability to articulate party policy; knowledge of politics; and demonstrable commitment to party and policies. The UUP requests in addition that one be intelligent, have credibility and be accountable.

Are the leaders of the parties confident that such skills are possessed by women within or outside their organisation? Remarks by several key members of the parties on RTE's *Prime Time*[2] are

Figure 3: regional list contenders and female regional candidates

instructive in this regard.

Peter Robinson of the DUP readily defined the position of women in the region: "The Ulster woman in the past has seen herself very much as being in support of her man." He continued: "No doors have been closed to women. As far as my party is concerned, the door is always open and we encourage women to come forward."

The DUP stood only eight women out of 54 candidates in the May election. In ten constituencies it did not run any women. Only two women were ranked number one in the constituencies; the highest female position on the regional list was eighth. It is difficult not to conclude that the mechanisms for encouraging women to stand were not deployed or did not produce Mr Robinson's desired result.

His desired result was certainly the defence of the Northern Ireland constitution, and he challenged the credibility of those women who ran as members of the newly-formed Northern Ireland Women's Coalition: "As far as those individuals that I have seen with the Women's Coalition [are concerned], they haven't been at the forefront of the battle when shots were being fired or when the constitution of Northern Ireland was in peril. They are not representative of the decent Ulster women that I speak to."

David Ervine of the PUP took a slightly different tack, acknowledging the capacity of women to run an election campaign, but also calling into question their ability to analyse and devise strategies to accommodate difference: "I do have some dubious thoughts about how they as a cross-community group can look at this election and understand why this election is called and then field candidates to actually deal with the problems that undoubtedly beset us."

He did go on to say that he was pleased that women were taking the initiative, indeed expressing empathy in terms of how alienated he felt himself to be from Northern Ireland politics. But he failed to locate any responsibility for this in either his current position or in earlier cultures of *machismo* with which he had been involved: "I'm sure, like me, they [the NIWC] feel to a degree alienated, they feel to a degree upset and disturbed by the fact that our politicians have failed us so miserably in the past. I haven't had an argument with that other than to say 'what can I do about it?'"

For the SDLP, Seamus Mallon too queried the rationale of the Women's Coalition. Without a hint of irony, he offered his analysis of "single-issue" platforms thus: "And I hope it [the NIWC] isn't damaged by making it almost a cult factor in Northern Ireland politics, because once it becomes a cult factor, then it starts to

become single-issue, then once it starts to become single-issue, it grows in on itself, and doesn't expand and kills itself off."

He went on to display thinking informed very much by a sugar 'n' spice and snails 'n' puppy-dog tails dichotomy. The women involved in the coalition, and by extension his own party, would not be "tough enough" for the negotiations:

> This won't be about setting differences aside, this will be facing differences that we have in this community, facing them full-frontal and dealing with those differences. What we must realise is that these negotiations which are going to take place are going to be very hard-nosed and they are going to be real and it's going to be down to political judgment in terms of the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin—and I hope they will be there—and the DUP. That is what it's going to be down to. And the real weight of political opinion will be shown through those political parties and I hope that weight is shaped by women within those parties.

So, the coalition women were playing at politics, and women could only shape political opinion if they were assisted by and operated within the parties. Maria Carragher, commenting for SF, offered an assessment, which, while still questioning the potential impact of the NIWC, did not seek to deride it on gender grounds:

"Well I don't think they are going to make any real impact on the vote as a whole, seeing as they are a newly organised party, are not very well established and people don't know what their agenda is. I don't believe they will affect it that much at all."

More striking evidence of these attitudes and policies is demonstrated by an examination of how many women candidates stood for parties in the recent election, and where they ranked (Figs 2, 3 and 4).

The election results merely affirm this

norm. Out of some 110 members elected to the forum, only 15 (13.6 per cent) were women—comparable to the proportion (11.5 per cent) which women members of district councils currently comprise. The adage 'power is where women are not'[3] holds true. As one gets closer to seats of power—the negotiations and committees—the paucity of women becomes more and more stark. Obviously one cannot predict the manner in which SF will deploy its elected women, but none of the other parties present have been represented by women at the table.

Such is women's relationship to formal politics in Northern Ireland. In an international context there is nothing hugely unusual in there being an imbalance in 'national' parliaments. In 1989, women constituted 12.7 per cent of the world's single or popular chambers; indeed, by 1991, this had fallen to 11 per cent.[4] In the UK, women make up 9.2 per cent of MPs,[5] while 12 per cent[6] of members of Dáil Eireann are female.[7] The most proximate UK region, Scotland, musters seven women MPs—9.7 per cent.[8] Northern Ireland has none.

While the constitutional legitimacy of elected bodies in Northern Ireland may be disputed, that should not, of itself, be a barrier to women's participation in elections to them. Clearly though, the attitudes—explicit or latent—in the minds of Northern Ireland's elected politicians are.[9] DD

Footnotes

[1] See Robert Miller, Rick Wilford and Freda Donoghue,*Women and Political Participation in Northern Ireland*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996, p14. The founding purpose of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, established in 1911, was the maintenance of the union, to which "all other questions in which individual members may be specially interested shall be subordinated". At the time the special interest was female suffrage; it was made very clear, therefore, that the union was of primary importance.
[2] May 23rd 1996
[3] E Vallance, 'Where Power Is, Women Are Not', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol 35, spring 1982, pp 218-9, cited in Miller et al, op cit
[4] cited in Women's Communication Centre, *Values and Visions: The Report from the What Women Want Social Survey*, London, 1996, p16
[5] *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: National Report of the United Kingdom*, London, 1994
[6] *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: National Report of Ireland*, Dublin, 1994
[7] These participation levels have been steadily increasing. In the UK, the percentage of women in parliament in 1983 was 3.5, in 1987 6.3 and 1992 9.2. In the republic, the percentage was 6.6 in 1981, dipped to 4.8 in February 1982, and increased subsequently as follows: November 1982 8.4, 1987 8.4, 1992 12.
[8] Engender, *Gender Audit 1995: Putting Scottish Women in the Picture*, Edinburgh, 1995
[9] Miller et al demonstrate that there is a gap between the mindset displayed by the politicians in the above-reported interviews and public attitudes towards women dealing with politics. In

general, the public identified and recognised skills they perceived women to have which would be beneficial to public life, and were in favour of more women being involved in politics. See Rick Wilford's chapter in this report.

Confined to stereotypes

Taking the toys from the boys—women assume the microphone

Liz Fawcett[1]

It has been put to me that the media in Northern Ireland are not "as guilty" of stereotyping women as the British tabloids, particularly in promoting women as sexual objects.[2]

Leaving aside the weekend tabloids, the *Sunday World* and *Sunday Life*, it might be said that the regional dailies are indeed less blatant. But the morning *News Letter* has certainly proved itself capable of rising to the challenge, given a suitable excuse. (By beginning with an example from its coverage, I do not mean to imply that it is more sexist than the other two dailies. They all stand guilty of that crime, as we shall see.)

A golden opportunity for some sexist stereotyping was provided by the legal row over the planned opening of a 'School Dinners' restaurant in Belfast, complete with waiters and waitresses saucily wielding canes to 'punish' recalcitrant customers. When the case was heard in the High Court in October 1995, the *News Letter* ran pictures of the would-be waitresses in their St Trinian's-style 'uniforms'. One of the waitresses was quoted as saying that the *waiters* actually wore less clothing than they did. (Sadly, there were no pictures of the men to support this point.)[3]

When the restaurant finally opened earlier this year, the *News Letter* ran a two-page colour spread. Again the emphasis, both pictures and text, was on the waitresses. The first half of the article reviewing the restaurant dwelt on the waitresses, starting by quoting one of them: "We're not bimbos, you know."[4]

Unfortunately the (male) writer then went on to declare: "The waitress at School Dinners was eager—too eager, perhaps—to point out that, despite her miniskirt, suspenders and St Trinian's style outfit, she has a brain." After being told that the waitresses "strike a variety of suggestive poses" and adopt "bimbo-esque" names, we finally get on to the waiters—for one paragraph, halfway through.

"The near-naked male waiters are a jovial lot, too, sporting lycra cycling sports and dickie-bow ties. They strut around like peacocks, although one was oblivious to the sniggers from diners who'd spotted his Dunnes grey Y-fronts sticking up from his waist." Perhaps not the most successful example of a male sex object. Yet, as a representative of the School Dinners company reportedly pointed out, the waiters were being represented in exactly the same context as their female counterparts. It was an "equal sexual situation, we have waiters and waitresses."

The *News Letter* editor, Geoff Martin,

told me readers had not taken offence at the paper's rather risqué coverage.[5] I suspect there would have been complaints, however, if it had devoted as much space to the theme of 'male waiters as sex objects' as to that of 'waitresses as sex objects'. The latter fits comfortably into a familiar stereotype. But men as sex objects? Is Ulster ready for such a revolution? I think not.

Needless to say, the *News Letter* was not the only Northern Ireland newspaper to bite eagerly at the 'School Dinners' bait. "I am sure we are guilty of some seriously chauvinistic work at times," Mr Martin admitted. He does not believe other newspapers are less so.

When he spoke to me, however, he proudly pointed out that the *News Letter* had just run a story in which a woman was featured in a serious, authoritative capacity, warning of the possibility of a rash of suicides amongst Northern Ireland farmers.[6] I commented that the lead paragraph referred to the woman as a "farmer's wife". Mr Martin thought the label had been one she had chosen. Having spent many years as a journalist, I can believe this.

In my experience, women are not eager to put themselves forward as spokespeople. They are often anxious to stress they are only so-and-so's wife or helper, or that they are not very good at speaking in public. Women's internalised beliefs are every bit as much a product of the patriarchal society in which we live as the stereotypes that saturate newspapers, television and radio.

The *News Letter*'s nationalist counterpart, the *Irish News*, issues guidelines to its journalists on avoiding sexism.[7] This includes avoiding sexist comments in reports and captions, and steering clear of terms such as 'businessman', 'mothers' (why not 'parents'?) and 'manning'. Recently, the *Irish News* ran a full-page preview of a special conference on women in business, with quotes from a number of women who ran their own enterprises.[8] The underlying theme was undoubtedly a positive 'you can do it, too' message to women. Yet four of the accompanying advertisements were concerned with a different message—how women might enhance their looks.

The conference itself was featured in the paper's recently-introduced pull-out business section.[9] I was impressed by this as I failed to find coverage of the event in the other regional dailies. Yet, it was not deemed newsworthy enough for more than a small mention on the news pages, despite being addressed by one of the leading female political figures in the Republic of Ireland, Mary O'Rourke, and the republic's insurance ombudsman, Paulyn Marrinan Quinn.

A much more prominent news story in the same issue of the *Irish News* was devoted to a more familiar theme: 'Women find how they can lose those pounds'. At least the organisers of the initiative featured in this article said they were planning to run a special session for men as well!

The preoccupation of the regional dailies with women's looks was very evident when Bill and Hillary Clinton visited Northern Ireland late last year. In a scathing article in the *News Letter*, headlined 'Sombre look does little for Hillary', Sandra Chapman castigated the US First Lady's dress sense—or lack of it.[10] "Did she think she was coming to Siberia with that heavy dark coat buttoned up to her chin as she stepped off the plane at Aldergrove?" sneered Ms Chapman. "Hillary has rarely capitalised on her magnificent colouring. She has excellent skin and keeps her hair lightened. At this time of year, she could have added a splash of colour as she stepped out ... Instead, she appears to have been subsumed by the White House officials, many of whom have seen her as interfering too much in politics." Quite so—a woman should know her rightful place.

Ms Clinton's only foray into politics in Belfast was also put in its rightful place by the Northern Ireland press.

'Hillary gets a woman's view over a cuppa' was how the evening *Belfast Telegraph* headlined her meeting with female community representatives. 'Teatime tonic for First Lady: Hillary sips a cuppa on the Ormeau' was the *Irish News* version. The *News Letter*'s two headlines stressed the serious side a little more: 'Hillary drops in for chat' and 'First ladies of peace "can teach the world"'.[11] But one article began: "She's small, a bottle blonde, surrounded by minders and she likes jogging—no, not Madonna, the other material girl, Presidential partner Hillary Clinton."

To its credit, the *News Letter* was more informative about what was discussed at the Lamplighter café meeting. Gail Walker of the *Telegraph* seemed captivated by the teapot and the "strong smell of turkey roasting in the kitchen". Anna-Marie McFaul of the *Irish News* described the teapot, the mug from which Ms Clinton sipped her tea, the First Lady's clothes and her make-up, ending: "Presumably it is a visit which Mrs Clinton will ... remember every time she puts her feet up and enjoys a hot cup of tea."

Clearly, her media aides must take some of the blame for the cosy domestic image the newspapers presented. It fits in beautifully with the stereotype so often accorded to women's participation in politics—as concerned with domestic

issues and primarily an extension of women's 'natural' homemaker role. Meanwhile, the men—Hillary's husband in this case—get on with 'real' politics. The women just play. Indeed, even though the *News Letter* did tell us in some detail what was said at the meeting on the Ormeau Road, it trivialised the event in one telling line: "... while Hillary *dallied* [my italics] with the women inside the Lamplighter café, the crowd [outside] swelled to over 400."

The keen-eyed reader may have noticed that the journalists I have just named as being 'guilty' of promoting stereotypes are all women. Perhaps their copy was edited by male sub-editors; perhaps not. A glance at almost any newspaper will show that many female writers are just as capable as their male counterparts of neatly fitting (whether consciously or unconsciously) into a patriarchal view of society. This is not to suggest that the under-representation of women in Northern Ireland's news industry should not be urgently addressed.

The current situation was outlined in stark terms in a recent report by the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement and Downtown Women's Centre.[12] *Who's Making the News?* found that only 24 per cent of editorial staff on Belfast newspapers were women, while women occupied just 13 per cent of management positions. This reflects the UK-wide situation. Only a quarter of respondents to a recent British survey of journalists were female.[13]

My own research, concerning women journalists in BBC Northern Ireland, suggests matters may be improving but are still unsatisfactory.[14] In August 1995, 37 per cent of the editorial staff in news and current affairs at Broadcasting House in Belfast were women. At that time, none of the five top jobs was held by a women. One has since been appointed to a senior post.

If some female journalists perpetuate a patriarchal view of society, it is because men still hold most of the powerful jobs, both in Northern Ireland's media and in every other realm in the region. I often gaze longingly at the pages of the *Irish Times*—filled (relatively speaking!) with pictures of, and quotes from, women in positions of power. Yet the *Irish Times* does not try to 'positively discriminate' in favour of female subjects or interviewees. According to one of its managing editors, David Nowlan, "persons of both genders are interviewed normally on the basis of their newsworthiness or their interest to readers. To attempt any kind of 'balance' between genders in this respect would make a nonsense of trying to cover news as it happens."[15]

Yet, the powerful define what *is* news.

The media look to government, party leaders, prominent business people, the police and the churches—to make the news and to make the statements that can be treated as 'authoritative' in news reports. With a few exceptions, this élite in Northern Ireland consists of men. Those who want to stop seeing women stereotyped and marginalised in its media face two choices: they can wait for society to change or they can try to initiate some change themselves. To its credit, BBC NI has chosen the latter option, and is compiling a directory of female contributors to bring more women on air.[16]

Despite the reservations expressed by the *Irish Times*, such an approach is well worthwhile. If women in certain organisations start appearing on radio and TV, they are likely to be valued more highly by their own organisations, and their self-confidence is likely to rise. Moreover, they will be providing role models for other women and, hopefully, will help men view women in a new light.

The newspaper editors who wrote or spoke to me in connection with this chapter were all anxious to stress their commitment to equal opportunities for women, in employment and in media coverage. Mr Martin told me he believed women in Northern Ireland should be applying more pressure on the media to change their approach.

Again, however, power and credibility come to the fore. If a senior politician or church leader in the region took the media to task over their portrayal of women, editors might sit up and listen. If a women's group issued a similar statement, would their initiative really be enough to persuade an editor drastically to alter the style of coverage—given the hierarchy of credibility that exists in this society? (Indeed, how much coverage would such a statement receive?)

As they announced their candidates for the elections last May, a number of political parties in the region seemed anxious to stress their proportion of female runners. If those parties stopped paying lip-service to women and started tackling sexism and sexual discrimination head-on, the stifling patriarchal cloud that hangs over Northern Ireland would begin to lift.

In the meantime, those in positions of power within the region's media could do their bit to shift that cloud just a little. DD

Footnotes

work on regional newspaper coverage of the visit in late 1995 to Northern Ireland of the US president, Bill Clinton, highlighted the points made in this chapter about the way the press handled the event.

[2] correspondence with the author

[3] *News Letter*, October 21st 1995; other issues of the paper that month also covered the story

[4] *News Letter*, February 19th 1996

[5] telephone interview with the author, May 2nd 1996

[6] *News Letter*, May 5th 1996

[7] information provided by the editor, Tom Collins

[8] *Irish News*, April 24th 1996

[9] *Irish News*, May 9th, 1996

[10] *News Letter*, December 1st 1995

[11] *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter*, December 1st 1995

[12] Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement and Downtown Women's Centre, *Who's Making the News?: Women in the Media Industry in Northern Ireland*, Belfast, 1996 (available from DWC, 30 Donegall St, Belfast BT1 2GQ)

[13] Anthony Delano and John Henningham, *The News Breed: British Journalists in the 1990s*, London Institute, London, 1995

[14] Liz Fawcett, 'The long haul to equality: women journalists at the BBC in Belfast', in Martin McLoone ed, *Broadcasting in a Divided Community: Seventy Years of the BBC in Northern Ireland*, Institute of Irish studies, Belfast, 1996

[15] quoted from correspondence with the author

[16] This information is contained in correspondence received by the author in connection with the scheme.

Independence or integration?

Roisín McDonough

Does community politics, and women's involvement in it, offer any lessons for other social spheres—particularly the formal political arena?

It needs to be said at the outset that there are tensions *within* the community and voluntary sector, divided as it is along sectarian, class and gender lines as much as by area of activity, orientation and relationship to the state. Moreover, a political 'settlement'—however evanescent that may seem—could undermine the current privileged regard for the voluntary sector in public-policy discourse, unless more productive relationships are built with politicians and other civil-society institutions.

Yet the power wielded by the voluntary sector is limited. So too has been the success of its efforts to become a fully recognised social partner, on equal terms with the trade unions, business and

Practising some old skills in the community ...

LESLEY DOYLE

farmers. And social policy issues are still largely absent from the political agenda. The lack of recognition of the contribution of women in community organisations and women's groups is thus only partly a product of the power relations within the voluntary sector, as well as society generally: a deformed polity, post-civil rights, has had its own atrophying effect.

It is widely acknowledged that Northern Ireland has a vibrant civil society, especially in territorially defined communities. This energy and dynamism has benefited, directly and indirectly, from the displacement of mainstream political activity, which rapidly became preoccupied post-'68 with constitutional concerns, to the virtual exclusion of all else. Many in the middle classes retreated into their private spheres, disdaining political involvement or even opting out of civil society. By contrast, many living in urban working-class ghettoes, responding to local pressures to tackle such issues as poverty and exclusion, housing, welfare rights, fuel debt, youth alienation, educational under-achievement and sectarianism, became active in community politics.[1]

Campaigns, associations and neighbourhood services, across a wide range of activities—from pre-school to senior citizens, including women's groups, networks and cross-community alliances—have proliferated during the past two to three decades. These activities, and the engagement of those involved, have undoubtedly assuaged some of the worst effects of violent conflict—via not only the services provided, important as these have been, but also the processes by which people have become engaged, attenuating their sense of alienation. And high participation in tackling local issues of common concern, prompted by community development, has helped restrain the paternalism of planners who 'knew best' how to redevelop communities.

It is women who have consistently been the mainstay of such activities—keeping the 'capillaries of community life' alive and helping improve morale and confidence.[2] It is important, however, to distinguish the types of involvement of women within the wide span of the community and voluntary sector. At one level, they are active and work alongside men in neighbourhood associations. At another, they are involved in some of the larger voluntaries. At a third, they are engaged in organisations mainly used by other women or in exclusively female arenas addressing women's issues and needs.

In organisations open to and providing services for all, there is little recognition of the specific contribution women

make. Smyth has argued that the structures and processes of community development "maintain inequity between men and women, undervalue and render invisible women's contribution and reproduce the ideology of sexism".[3] At best, admiring condescension vies with marginalisation. Women are active initiators in many instances, forming the backbone of groups, yet rarely perform leading roles or occupy influential negotiating positions *vis-à-vis* those responsible for public policy. Their impact on the structure and culture of most community groups has also been circumscribed by the persistent power of patriarchal assumptions about women's domestic and familial responsibilities, as unpaid (and hence undervalued) carers.[4]

Women continue to do the background, 'donkey' work in many instances, timetabling their commitments around children and husbands, whilst men rarely face such constraints and have little hesitation in assuming leadership or authority in groups. There are notable (particularly urban) exceptions, but the trend is consistent. Research into the role of women in the community and voluntary sector is also weak: gender-blindness abounds here as much as elsewhere.

Women, however, are also active in other parts of the voluntary sector. The 70s and 80s saw a rapid growth of services organised by women for women—Women's Aid and Derry Wellwoman, to name but a few. The late 80s witnessed the proliferation of women's centres and groups at neighbourhood level, including the Women's Information Group. Most share many of the aims and values of the women's movement, or at least accept that much of the progress made by women in society has been because of it—even if the vast majority are reluctant to identify personally with a feminist label.

The negative image of feminism and the attribution of a 'lack of femininity' to feminists—primarily constructed by hostile media—is even more acute in Northern Ireland, where feminism is (negatively) associated with lesbianism and homophobic prejudices are more predominant than in the rest of the UK. Siann and Wilkinson argue[5] that "many women reject feminism because they fear this will undermine their sense of their own femininity". Recognising that culture clearly plays a role in restricting women, they observe that there is also a fundamental ambivalence within feminism itself, as many feminists appear "torn as to how to reconcile '*sexual difference*' with demands for equality. Equality has often seemed to be about '*sameness*' rather than allowing for '*difference*' between the sexes. The result is confusion in the

minds of many women who favour both *sexual equality and an acknowledgement of gender differences*."

In Northern Ireland, moreover, where kinship and family ties are strong within communities, feminism's perceived analysis of 'the family' as a primary site of women's oppression has left many working-class women extremely reluctant to embrace a 'feminist' identity on its own. An interesting subversion of these seemingly polar opposites has been

... and learning some new ones

attributed to the late Belfast community worker Joyce McCartan, who proclaimed herself and the women with whom she worked to be "family feminists".

Whatever the identities locally-based women's groups embrace, their distinctiveness from others within the community and voluntary sector—how they organise, their structure and their culture—is evident. There is often considerable user participation in management and decision-making generally and a disdain for the formalised hierarchies of more traditional voluntary and public bodies. This is allied to a tendency for women who have been the recipients of services to become involved later in provision for other women.

The social disadvantage women face is reflected in the community and voluntary sector, with women's groups being the 'second sex' within it. Yet networks, associations and women's activities continue to flourish, in spite of the underlying dynamic of social and sexual containment.

In her study[6] of women's voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland, Ruth Taillon has argued that "the plethora of services organised by women for women—often with the most minimal of resources—must stand as a clear indication that women have specific needs which are not otherwise being met by the statutory and voluntary sectors." She revealed a pattern of undervaluing and therefore under-resourcing of women-oriented projects, groups and services. She recommended a co-ordinated funding policy for the community and voluntary sector, which would prioritise the needs of women's groups by adopting 'positive action measures' within an equal opportunities policy. This, however, remains as far off as ever.

The community and voluntary sector has always been riven by divisions and shifting alliances. Surface tensions before the ceasefires were supplanted by fundamental questions about the sector and its role in their aftermath. Latter-day privileging of community development and grassroots activity, by both policy-makers and funders—particularly in the context of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation—has produced a nervousness amongst 'professionalised' voluntary organisations who query the capacity of small community groups to provide effective services locally, as well as to survive after the 'peace package' moneys have dried up.

Other voluntary organisations, perhaps having seen the writing on the wall some time ago, are in a self-proclaimed transitional state—changing

from paternalistic service providers to user-led partnerships, which involve local people in campaigning for change, in policy development and in devising models of good practice. Save the Children Fund and Barnardos' have emerged as two examples of organisations with a distinct, anti-poverty and developmental, rather than service-based, focus.

Diana Leat's study[7] of managers who have moved from capitalist to voluntary organisations challenges some of the myths about a distinctive organisational culture, *modus operandi* and value base in the voluntary sector: its alleged egalitarianism; less emphasis on hierarchy; more participatory and sociable nature; greater commitment to a common cause; embrace of equal opportunities; a consumer orientation; and a generally self-sacrificing, hard-working, hair-shirt style. Her study revealed a gap between words and deeds, uneven practices, much competitiveness as opposed to co-operation, as much self-seeking behaviour as elsewhere, a reluctance to get rid of those who under-perform, slower decision-making (with too much stress on process at the expense of product), internal factionalism and frequent failure to prioritise users.

The community and voluntary sector has always expressed a fundamental ambivalence towards the state, as it has been pressed (if less these days) to assume responsibility for delivery of previously state-run community care. It has also, in the main, resisted adopting a partisan position on the conflict in Northern Ireland. It sees itself rather as having contributed to an ideologically neutral space, in which opposing allegiances remain firmly outside. While there *is* a recognition of the differential development of the two main communities, Fitzduff argues[8] that there is nonetheless a fundamental lack of agreement about the "endogenous or exogenous nature of the conflict or about the need to prioritise (or combine) the psychocultural or structural approaches" to it, which hampers understanding generally and community-relations work in particular.

The voluntary sector's unwillingness to engage more concertedly in a community-relations agenda is understandable, according to Fitzduff. Groups are often working at the edge, assisting physical and social survival for many marginalised by poverty and exclusion. To add to that burden might be to stretch them beyond the limits of endurance. Others are afraid that, by addressing sectarianism, their fragile alliances with others would disintegrate—and for some living in front-line communities it might be dangerous to do so. Added to this is a belief amongst many that it is a

fundamental responsibility of government, rather than the voluntary sector, to rectify issues of sectarianism seen as ultimately caused by government itself.

The uneasiness of relationships with the state has been alleviated to some degree, with the advent of the 26 district partnerships established under the peace package. Friction remains, but there is at least a new willingness to attempt to work with local private, public and political representatives in tackling common social and economic issues. This may indeed be less of a culture shock for community groups with a record of working with public bodies, than for councillors who have often eschewed interest in or responsibility for 'bread-and-butter' issues, and who are more overtly hostile to any moves towards the sharing of power and responsibility than other sectors.

The district partnerships will, however, present the voluntary sector with an uncomfortable challenge to its privileged position as principal barometer of community need and demand, and consequent negotiator with government (as evidenced in the government's own Strategy for Support of the Voluntary Sector and Community Development). Instead of that representational hegemony, it will have to negotiate with other local representatives—politicians in particular—

who are increasingly asking pertinent, if somewhat uncomfortable, questions about mandates and democratic accountability. New forms of governance pose new problems. The willingness and openness with which such problems are embraced is usually a good indicator as to the potential outcome.

The need to ensure women's participation in the district partnerships was taken most seriously by the voluntary sector. Experience from the republic's local development programme funded by European moneys reveals the difficulties—after four years of trying—in ensuring that women's voices are represented equally on such partnerships across all sectors. Voluntary compliance, in respect of gender equality, has now been replaced by a funding contract complete with penalty clauses for failure to meet agreed gender targets. Women in Northern Ireland are watching such developments closely.

The 'peace package' is the only arena where efforts to have the voluntary sector recognised as a full social partner have been successful. The challenge remains to secure recognition *vis-à-vis* the monitoring of mainstream EU structural funds and, more crucially, in terms of mainstream domestic programmes. Notwithstanding Tory ideological abhorrence of *any* steps towards more modern

European conceptions of social partners, negotiating and working alongside government where appropriate, the capacity of the voluntary sector to win this prize will also depend on its performance.

First, it must build the necessary alliances locally and regionally. Secondly, it must deliver a mature sectoral response, recognising that negotiated compromises do not of necessity mean emasculation of independence or renunciation of the right to remain critical as seen fit. Rather than being continuously placed in the invidious position of being seen to carp from the sidelines, the voluntary sector is afforded by the district partnerships its most fundamental challenge to date: is it up to the (shared) responsibility inevitably associated with taking major decisions, and can it throw off a mendicant mentality?

Northern Ireland is a society in transition, commencing the difficult journey of self-reflection as a fundamental first step towards self-reconstitution. The lessons of community politics, and women's unique contribution to it, could be a significant point from which to start that journey. Male politicians and governments will ignore these at their peril: learning those lessons just might permit us to leapfrog from the atavism of the past 25 years into a more modern, tolerant and pluralist society. DD

Footnotes

[1] Andy Pollak ed, *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opshal Report on Northern Ireland*, Lilliput, Dublin 1993

[2] Marie Abbot and Roisín McDonough, 'Changing women: women's action in Northern Ireland', in Eamonn Deane ed, *Lost Horizons, New Horizons: Community Development in Northern Ireland*, Workers' Educational Association, Belfast, 1989

[3] Marie Smyth, 'Women, peace, community relations and voluntary action', in Nick Acheson and Arthur Williamson eds, *Voluntary Action and Social Policy in Northern Ireland*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1995

[4] Fred St Leger and Norman Gillespie, *Informal Welfare in Three Belfast Communities*, Department of Health and Social Services, Belfast, 1991

[5] Siann and Wilkinson, *Gender, Feminism and the Future*, Demos Working Paper, London, 1995

[6] Ruth Taillon, *Grant Aided or Taken for Granted?,* Women's Support Network, Belfast, 1992

[7] Diana Leat, *Challenging Management*, VOLPROF, City University Business School, London, 1995

[8] Mari Fitzduff, 'Managing community relations and conflict: voluntary organisations and government and the search for peace', in Acheson and Williamson, op cit

Framing the future

Eilish Rooney

The opportunity to discuss how the Framework Document[1] may, or may not, relate to women in Northern Ireland is welcome. But there is a Catch 22 in writing about 'women and [anything]'.

The impression may be encouraged that, by virtue of being separately addressed, women are thereby taken care of, dealt with, perhaps even *included* in the debates—whether on politics, history, religion or economics. Yet the vast bulk of analysis in these areas in Northern Ireland makes no mention of gender. And where the structure of relationships between the sexes is seen as irrelevant, women are excluded.[2]

In mainstream debate, women are *assumed* to be included. Yet when a separate space for 'women and ...' is created, the pressure to integrate gender, to include women, into ostensibly gender-free understanding is lessened. The idea that women can, and perhaps should, be dealt with separately, even additionally, is subtly reinforced: 'women' are made visible in the separate space but the penalties are insidious.

Another catch of the 'women and ...' approach is that it reinforces the notion that women comprise a homogeneous category, sharing essential qualities or experiences. But gender identity is one component of complex networks of class, race, religion, culture, geographical location, sexual preference and age; and it is a resultant of physical characteristics, social experience, political analysis, national identity and historical moment. Women are differently positioned in relation to each other.

Nationalist/republican/Catholic women and unionist/loyalist/Protestant women are situated differently within the social, economic, religious and political hierarchies of Northern Ireland, and in relation to each other. The commonalities

and differences in women's interests, experiences and politics are embedded within these hierarchies, which circumscribe politics and identity. One vital commonality is that within the networks of interlocking hierarchies women are subordinate to men—admirable exceptions prove the rule.

Writing about the Framework Document and women is difficult because most people have forgotten the details, if they ever knew them. Its import has been overtaken by events: the tactical breakdown of the IRA (and loyalist?) ceasefire, the 'multi-party' talks, and the elections to the Northern Ireland Forum, the function of which was at the time of writing still in dispute. The document is not top of any political agenda.

It is, however, the expression of the British government's ideas, "as to how local people could take far more control over the way Northern Ireland is governed, on a fair and equitable basis". And it articulates "a shared understanding ... between the British and Irish Governments, as to how relations in the island of Ireland, and between these islands, might be based on co-operation and agreement to the mutual advantage of all". These are respectively contained in two proposals: 'A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland', and 'A New Framework for Agreement'.

The document refers variously to 'the people', 'all of the people', 'the two main traditions' and 'both sides of the community'. Whatever political dispute there may be about 'both sides' thinking, theoretically at least the language is inclusive of men and women. Again, when new political institutions in Northern Ireland are considered *vis-à-vis* Britain and the republic, women and men are nominally included. The references, contentious for some unionists, to 'the people of Ireland' and 'the people in the island of Ireland' surely refer to all.

Nor does the 90-person Northern Ireland assembly proposed in part 1 of the Framework Document, with its checks and balances and panel of three directly-elected referees, exclude women *per se*. Men and women are, conceptually, included amongst the 65-75 per cent weighted majority required in the assembly to deal with legislation with constitutional implications. And neither theoretically nor intentionally does the power of petition by 25-35 per cent of assembly members, for the protection of minority rights, exclude in this manner.

Nevertheless, whatever the uncertainties about how such an assembly might work, or how the panel could operate within the requirement of unanimity, *there is one certainty*. As set out in the document, regional accountability

and decision-making within new structures would, in reality, be carried out almost entirely by males. The gender composition of new institutions would mirror the gender composition of old institutions. Decision-making, and disputes about the decisions, would largely be the province of men.[3] Some women would be present but in small proportions.

The emergence before the forum elections of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, and the dynamic dialogue between women in preparation of its progressive manifesto, had their impact on pre-election debates: all parties wanted to be seen to be woman-friendly and to indicate the promotion of women on their party lists. In the event, 14 per cent of the elected representatives were female (15 out of 110).[4]

If there really was a 'level playing-field' in politics—as politicians of all hues frequently demand—then elected, representative assemblies could be expected to reflect the socio-economic and gender composition of the people who elect them. Just as, if there was true 'parity of esteem' in the workplace, then women, as well as Catholics, would be present in all ranks in proportionate numbers. If there was a fair distribution of rights and responsibilities in the home, then care of children, the elderly and the sick would

be carried out equally by men and women. None of these situations obtains.

It is sometimes suggested that women's primary responsibilities in the home explain why they are not present in elected assemblies on a par with men. Women indeed currently bear primary responsibility for the material and emotional maintenance of families. This work has serious resource implications for education, health and public spending, areas about which women have particular insights. Some thus argue, conversely, that women's primary responsibilities in this private sphere should privilege their involvement in setting priorities and informing policy decisions. This may be a useful tactical argument for special arrangements to ensure the equitable participation of women in political decision-making. But it burdens female representatives with additional responsibilities to represent women as a separate group.[5]

Representative democracy is about more than the vote. Various political processes which precede the act of voting are vital and largely determine who is selected as a representative and which kinds of decisions may be taken. The organisation of political parties, selection procedures and the influence of lobbying bodies, campaigning groups and—particularly in Northern Ireland—quangos,

as well as access to resources, build advantages for some into the 'game' on the political playing-field.

A related problem with representative democracy is that the inequities of the private and civil spheres are transmitted into the public domain. As David Beetham explains, "the opportunity for a more extensive involvement [in representative democracy], and the degree of influence with government which [it] carries are dependent on a variety of resources—of time, of money, of learned capacity—that are distributed unevenly between sections of the population".[6] This suggests connections between representative democracy, women's social and economic roles, their access to resources of time, money and learned capacity, and their absence from electoral assemblies. Resources are unevenly distributed and this inequity is reflected in the interests represented in, or excluded from, democratic assemblies.[7]

Theoretically, liberal democracy excludes differences (other than age) between voters—whether of class, gender or ethnicity. The franchise is theoretically blind to difference; each vote is of equal worth. One of the achievements of the civil rights campaigns of the late 60s and early 70s in Northern Ireland was the removal of 'difference' in the form of the property franchise in local government elections. But the experience of the state, before and since, has repeatedly demonstrated that in a society divided on sovereignty 'democracy' may be one other means of entrenching the subordinate position of the smaller group.

The checks and balances built into new political institutions, as described in the Framework Document, would *admit difference* into the operation of democracy. Each vote would remain of equal worth but weighted majorities, threshold petitions and panel consensus requirements would require and safeguard the participation of (some) nationalists in decision-making. These mechanisms might, however, cement nationalist and unionist identities and differences; allegiances could be institutionalised in ways that left little space for alliances between other marginalised groups. There would be no incentive and little potential for freeing up more political space for other democratic claims.

For example, it is conceivable that the right to petition objections to weighted majority decisions, proposed at 25-35 per cent of assembly members, could involve collaboration between Sinn Féin, Progressive Unionist party and Ulster Democratic party (and Women's Coalition?) members, who represent predominantly working-class constituencies, protesting about spending allocation

LESLEY DOYLE

decisions. But the weighted mechanisms in the Framework Document proposals are specifically designed to 'protect minority rights' relating to 'contentious legislation'. Emergent cross-political, class interests in social and economic equity would be constrained by enormous pressures to conform to identity-based decision-making.[8]

The potential to develop politics around social and economic rights, better living standards and improved health and education might thus be circumscribed by the incentives to consolidate

and manipulate identities—a dynamic, after all, of the politics of Northern Ireland since it was established. It could be, however, that the protection of rights to decisive, democratic participation would facilitate tactical alliances and open new political space for access to decision-making.

Thus, while the Framework Document is ostensibly democratic and gender-free (chair*man*ships notwithstanding) and assumes inclusion of 'all the people', its language is already conceptually weighted, including by gender, in hidden (and sometimes overt) ways. And there are various crude and subtle mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation of many people in Northern Ireland, women and men, from the democratic process.

One subtle mechanism, albeit crudely experienced, is poverty. The one out of three children growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland does not begin with the same life chances, and opportunities to participate in society, as the other two. The exclusion of the Irish Republican Socialist party from the lists for the forum elections and the conditional admission of Sinn Féin's constituency to talks have been blunt mechanisms of democratic denial experienced by men and women in these parties.[9]

Different women experience political exclusion and inclusion in different ways. What Pankhurst and Pearce have to say about transplanting western discourses about women's exclusion to third-world contexts is instructive for women in a politically divided society like Northern Ireland: "Emphasis on women's exclusion … can eclipse other mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation taking place on bases other than those of gender relations. Without a commitment to integrate the analysis of gender relations within the wider context of other social relations there is the risk of assuming the primacy of gender as a marginalising process, rather than investigating it."[10]

Gender is indeed a primary marginalising process but it cannot be understood in an apolitical context that fails to account for differentiated access to power. In Northern Ireland that means investigating gender in contexts of class, sectarianism, nationalist identities and ideologies (Irish and British), and the power and history of political violence.

When the Framework Document was published, the proposals attracting most controversy were those dealing with north-south relationships. Words like 'harmonisation' and 'dynamic' were used to describe possible institutional relationships in such areas as industrial development, social welfare, education, tourism promotion and agriculture. At

the time, these proposals were seen by commentators, unionist politicians and small-u unionists as, at least, suggestive of pushing Northern Ireland into unacceptable institutional arrangements with the republic, as destabilising the state and enshrining 'interference' by the south in the affairs of the north. At worst, the proposals were seen to pave the road to 'Dublin rule'.

This language, and the list of categories where harmonisation would be possible, were cited as evidence of the capacity of these institutional relationships to develop without clearly defined limits.[11] Women and men, from nationalist and unionist perspectives, expressed shared views on the controversial proposals about the north-south body and the language of the document. As with other constitutional questions or crises in Northern Ireland, women and men pulled in behind their 'communality of interests'.[12]

The 'democratic dialogue' harnessed by the Ulster People's College in its seminars on the Framework Document generated common, and different, interests amongst participants, and recalled for me my first such experiences, in a 'People's Inquiry' into education. The inquiry was organised in west Belfast by Springhill Community House. All experiences and views were welcomed, listened to and examined. The inquiry was recorded and later published. It was followed by other inquiries into employment, religion and justice.

With these empowering experiences in mind, and anticipating the debilitating frustrations with progress in the 'talks process', Elizabeth Meehan's proposals for various mechanisms to liberate, enlarge and order democratic debate within and between communities are welcome.[13] She proposes citizens' juries and consensus conferences.

Given the problems we face in the future, this may seem a weak note on which to end. But organised, face-to-face dialogue has played a vital role for women in neighbourhood groups and the wider voluntary sector. The experiences of conducting dialogue around hard issues, of mounting tactical alliances and campaigns around shared interests, and of working to improve life within communities have not made women shed their political allegiances—but they have made a difference to the women involved. Without this, the Women's Coalition would not have been on the electoral lists in May, productively annoying most of the political parties.

This is a society in transition—the Framework Document is one marker. Yet if its proposals were realised, in all their

specificity and lack of clarity, they would not resolve problems at the heart of western democracies at the end of the century. The alienation, exclusion—perhaps even expulsion—of many men, women and children from social participation into the politics of survival, within a voiceless 'underclass', is not addressed there. The absence of women from decision-making goes unmentioned. That major economic decisions—affecting living standards, poverty and job prospects—are taken by private institutions beyond minimal democratic accountability is invisible in its list of protected rights.

The passionate and practical challenge is the creation of a more just society. Democratic dialogue has a role to play in that future. ▣

Footnotes

[1] What is loosely described as the Framework Document actually encompasses two documents—one by the British government primarily about proposed 'internal' institutions for Northern Ireland, and one reflecting the two governments' view of north-south and amended British-Irish arrangements—wrapped up in Northern Ireland Office, *Frameworks for the Future*, Belfast, 1995.

[2] Carol Pateman uses this argument in relation to democracy to claim that "women have never been and still are not admitted as full and equal members and citizens in any country known as a 'democracy'"; see her 'Feminism and democracy', in Graeme Duncan ed, *Democratic Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

[3] This discussion is confined to the elected assembly proposed in the FD. In Northern Ireland government departments, centralised agencies, and area boards with appointed members administer key services such as housing, economic development, health and social services, and education. In important ways, direct rule has become government by appointed administration and public agency. See Michael Connolly, *Politics and Policy-making in Northern Ireland*, Philip Allen, London, 1990.

[4] The coalition is an instance of practical political opportunity (and energy) taking a leap where feminist theoretical imaginings have not gone before. The coalition ran 70 candidates for the election, gaining 7,731 votes (1 per cent), representation at the talks table and two seats in the forum.

[5] See Anne Phillips, 'Why should the sex of the representatives matter?', in *Women and Public Policy: The Shifting Boundaries between the Public and Private Domains*, Erasmus University, Rotterdam (1994).

[6] David Beetham, 'Liberal democracy and the limits of democratisation', in David Held ed, *Prospects for Democracy: North South East West*, Polity, Cambridge, 1993

[7] Added to this relatively transparent point are the subtle impacts of professionalisation within western politics: political representatives are drawn increasingly from the professions of law, accountancy, higher education and so on. Northern Ireland *appears*, however, to be insulated from these professionalisation processes. There may be many reasons for this: political violence, no regional decision-making assembly, political stagnation, the absence of a professional political ladder, and alternative access to decision-making via quangos and Northern Ireland Office appointments. This has sometimes been seen as

the flight of the middle classes in Northern Ireland from politics. The seriously wealthy, though, rarely enter the fray of representative assemblies—perhaps, they do not need to. For analysis of British democracy, economy and the state, and the relationship between them, see Will Hutton, *The State We're In*, Vintage, London, 1995.

[8] Since the 1994 ceasefires there have been significant tactical collaborations between community development organisations, and individuals, in Catholic and Protestant west Belfast around strategies for responding to economic and educational initiatives in the area.

[9] The two governments' condition for Sinn Féin's participation in the talks was a resumption of the IRA ceasefire. The party could have participated in the forum but elected to abstain.

[10] D Pankhurst and J Pearce, 'Feminist perspectives on democratisation in the south: engendering or adding women in?', in H Afshar ed, *Women and Politics in the Third World*, Routledge, London, 1996

[11] In his submission to the Ulster People's College seminar on the Framework Document (April 1995), Arthur Aughey noted the disparity between the detail of the document's proposals for institutions within Northern Ireland and the lack of clarity on the north-south body. In his view, this fostered unionist fears that the document promoted a nationalist agenda. Paul Bew argued for a careful reading: he drew attention to the confusion about the requirement for unionist agreement to the 'dynamic' of a north-south body and to the limitations of harmonisation, while also noting the conditionality of proposed action on the republic's constitutional claim to the six counties. Fionnuala O Connor claimed the thinking in the document was signalled in the early uses of language referring to 'the people of the island of Ireland' and the British government's statement that it had 'no limits' to impose on the north-south body.

[12] The expression is Linda Colley's and comes from her review of Olwen Hufton's *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500-1800* (Harper Collins, 1995) in the *Observer Review*, November 5th 1995. Colley applauds Hufton's approach to the 'commonality of interests' between women and men, too often undervalued in much feminist writing on history.

[13] Elizabeth Meehan, 'Democracy unbound', in DD report 3, *Reconstituting Politics*, 1996

In a wider world ...

Anne Marie Gray
Deirdre Heenan

The political disadvantage experienced by women continues to be the subject of much research and discussion.[1] Most political systems remain dominated by men. While there has been evidence of (numerical) improvement in women's representation, there is not yet any legislature in which women have achieved parity.

Last year's report of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women noted that in 1993 women still only comprised 8.8 per cent of representatives in lower houses of parliament worldwide. There were no women in the parliaments of 11 countries and the goal of 33 per cent, set by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1990, had been met in just five.

The United Kingdom occupies the unenviable position of having fewer women, proportionately, in Parliament than most other European Union members—only France, Greece and Portugal had lower figures in 1994. Lovenduski argues: "Applied to British political institutions and processes, the typology of gender balance illuminates a pattern of male gender biases in which male images and particular forms of masculinity dominate political life."[2]

This is a rather negative picture, masking advances which have been made, particularly in the Nordic countries. Until the 60s there was little to separate any of the countries in northern and western Europe. But by 1984 women had gained 15 per cent of parliamentary seats in Iceland, 26 per cent in Norway and Denmark, 28 per cent in Sweden and 31 per cent in Finland. The advance was sustained in Norway, which by 1985 had achieved the 'world record': 34 percent of its National Assembly seats were held by women, as were eight out

of 18 cabinet posts, and women comprised 40.5 per cent of the membership of county councils.[3]

Norderval argues[4] that in the Nordic countries arguments for increased female representation have relied on three main principles. First is democratic justice—that justice is an important principle, and that it is unjust that women are under-represented on decision-making bodies. Second is resource utilisation—that valuable human resources are wasted when half the population is not involved in politics. The third is interest representation—that because of the different experiences of women and men (in relation to economic and social structures) they have different political interests, implying that in politics women will employ a different set of values and pursue different interests from men.

These principles provided the rationale for increasing the representation of women and contributed to theoretical debates about participation. But actual gains for women in Scandinavian parliaments have also stemmed from structural factors—such as electoral systems and methods of selection—and initiatives like quota-based reforms. Advancement must also be placed in its cultural, social and economic context, as discussed below.

Countries which have made the most significant advances are those where the electoral system is not based on first past the post but proportional representation. Compare elections in the Netherlands (an example of strict proportionality) with those in the UK (a purely majoritarian system). In the former, voters choose between lists of party candidates within a single national constituency. Under such a system, where parties have to put forward lists of nominees, women's representation has increased. Central party organisations have greater influence over nominations and so, if they are committed to including more women, can do so.

In the British system, on the other hand, voters in a constituency choose a single candidate to represent them in parliament. Here, even if central party organisations wanted to include more female candidates, they might find it difficult to impose those wishes on local selectorates. Lovenduski,[5] who notes that the success rate of women candidates in Britain *de*creased between 1945 and 1992, argues that such a pattern is not the result of electoral choice primarily, but of prior nomination practices.

Another distinctive feature of Scandinavian systems has been the introduction of quotas. Their advocates[6] claim they are necessary to enable a critical mass of women to be elected. Only when women comprise at least 30 per cent of representatives can they be

influential in the realm of policy-making.

Party reform, based on quotas, has been widely adopted in Norway, where the Socialist Left, Labour and Liberal parties each require at least 40 per cent representation of each sex at all levels of party activity; in order to reach quota requirements, parties are forced to recruit more women. In many countries, however, the impact of quotas has been more marked nationally than at local level. Local organisations have often been indifferent to actively recruiting more women, citing what they call 'practical' reasons—such as perceived low interest among women—for their failure to meet targets.

In the UK, Clare Short has consistently argued that increasing women's representation is essential to build a House of Commons which more truly represents the population. She claims that as more women come into the Commons, the culture will change and the institution will be transformed. But as Labour's experience indicates, resort to quotas is extremely contentious. It represents a significant departure for the UK political system and as such—in the form of women-only shortlists for Labour—was challenged in the courts and rejected.

Yet, as Squires notes,[7] the unchallenged assumption underpinning the debate about quotas is that it does matter that there are so few women in politics. She argues that, while the drive for quotas has failed to date, perhaps the challenge is to look towards a more expansive review of the system, rather than tinkering with it. This would need to embrace a view of representation not just concerned with Parliament but with the wider institutions of governance.

Of course, any discussion of women, politics and decision-making must go beyond electoral politics. In many developed countries since the 80s, responsibility for key policy areas and administrative responsibilities has been removed from central and local government. In many states, appointed boards ('quangos'), operating at arm's length from government, have become the new bureaucracy.[8] Given that such agencies are appointed, rather than elected, it could be argued that women could thereby be advantaged. For instance, governments usually have responsibility for making or at least sanctioning appointments, and could therefore ensure greater representation of women.

To some extent this has happened in Norway.[9] And a Dutch government guideline asserts that 50 per cent of members of all such public committees and boards should be women.[10] There are no quotas for women on non-departmental public

bodies in the UK. Since 1988, however, mainly due to pressure from the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland, government has taken some steps to increase female representation on boards in the region.

Women currently account for 32 per cent of such board members in Northern Ireland. This is a significant improvement on the 1986 figure of 18 per cent, although the target of 33 per cent, set by government for 1993, has still not been achieved. It also remains the case that of the 142 boards in Northern Ireland, 21 have no female members and—as has been found in studies in the Netherlands, despite the more prevalent female appointments there—women are less likely to be appointed to more senior positions.

Internationally, reform in public administration and management has meanwhile resulted in boards becoming more specialised and technocratic. A bureaucratic style has been adopted which is intrinsically patriarchal, a managerialism which has strong associations with masculinity.[11] Yet while there has been a burgeoning literature on non-departmental public bodies and this 'new public management',[12] little consideration has been given to its gender implications.

There is a real danger that this shift to the privileging of expertise, away from a more participative democracy, could stifle opportunities for increasing women's representation. One is reminded of Figes' statement that "selectors have a regrettable tendency to recruit in their own image".[13] Until women are adequately represented among selectors, they will have difficulty becoming appointees.

Much comparative research puts the greater public presence of women in Scandinavian countries down almost entirely to institutional influences, such as electoral systems. But factors outside political processes are central to women's exclusion—such as their role within the (private) family, which if entrenched defines them as *outside* the (public) political arena. Thus women may also do better in Nordic states because these share a more liberal attitude towards women, while other countries, such as the United States, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, uphold more conservative and traditional values. Negative social attitudes towards female élites can clearly deter many women from standing for office.

A host of other social and economic factors must also be considered. If one thinks about how élites in every system are drawn from highly educated, professional groups, and how their eligibility for public office often derives from their field of work and the contacts they have established, then particularly in a culture

such as that of the UK women are going to be disadvantaged. Yes, more and more women are highly educated, but entering the labour market has not resulted in a lessening of their domestic responsibilities. To many, the prospect of active involvement in politics must seem little more than a potential additional burden.

Phillips argues that a growing proportion of women will enter politics, but that "those elected will be peculiarly skewed to a certain kind of woman who, like the generations of men who went before her, will be a well-educated professional, and devoted to politics full-time".[14] Even in the Nordic countries, greater proportionality has not resulted in equal access for *all* women. We need to think beyond the numerical and to grasp the wider issue of representation. We need to think about how to encourage a more diverse range of women to put themselves forward, which involves rethinking women's role within the family.

A positive note, however, to end on. Although there is disagreement within feminist political science on whether and how women's interests can be construed, McLeay notes[15] the gathering body of evidence which demonstrates one thing—that the feminisation of political decision-making *does* make a difference to policy outcomes. DD

Footnotes

[1] J Lovenduski, *Women and European Politics: Contemporary Feminism and Public Policy*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1986, and 'Sex, gender and British politics', *Parliamentary Affairs* vol 49, no 1, 1996; P Norris, 'Women's legislative participation in western Europe', in S Bashevkin ed, *Women and Politics in Western Europe*, Frank Cass, London, 1985; V Randall, *Women and Politics*, Macmillan, London, 1987; A Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, 1991

[2] Lovenduski, 1996, p6

[3] Lovenduski, 1986

[4] I Norderval, 'Party and legislative participation among Scandinavian women', in Bashevkin, op cit

[5] Lovenduski, 1996

[6] R Brooks, C Eagle and C Short, *Quotas Now: Women in the Labour Party*, Fabian Tract, London, 1990; H Skjeie, *The Feminisation of Power: Norway's Political Experiment*, Institute for Social Research, Norway, 1986

[7] J Squires, 'Quotas for women: fair representation', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol 49, no 1, 1996

[8] C Hood and G Schuppert eds, *Delivering Public Services in Western Europe*, Sage, London, 1988; J Stewart, 'Re-inventing accountability', *Demos Quarterly*, vol 1, no 14, 1993

[9] L Morkhagen, *The Position of Women in Norway*, produced by Nytt fra Norge for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

[10] J Oldersama, and M Janzen-Marquand, 'Has Socrates risen?', unpublished conference paper, University of Leyden

[11] A Gray and B Jenkins, 'Markets, management and the public service: the changing of a culture', in P Taylor-Gooby and R Lawson eds, *Markets and Managers: New Issues in the Delivery of Welfare*, Open University, Milton Keynes, 1993

[12] C Hood, 'A public management for all seasons', *Public Administration*, no 3, 1991; G Jones, *International Trends in New Public Management*,

Public Policy Group Working Paper, London School of Economics, London, 1994

[13] K Figes, *Because of Her Sex: The Myth of Equality for Women in Britain*, Macmillan, London, 1994

[14] Phillips, op cit

[15] E McLeay, 'Women and the problem of parliamentary representation: a comparative perspective', *Political Science*, vol 45, no 1, 1993

Representing women

Making a point against a male order

Rick Wilford

Two of the key ingredients of political activity are, as Robin Wilson observed in an earlier DD report,[1] its procedures and its outcomes.

In democratic systems these are, or should be, integrally related. Any disjunction between them risks at best disillusion and at worst alienation—neither conducive to the manufacture of consent or to political stability.

Democratic politics should also be transparent. As Bernard Crick once put it, "the unique character of political activity lies, quite literally, in its publicity"[2]: the means by which decisions are taken, as well as the substance of those they purport to represent, must be observable. In Northern Ireland, however, the 'accountability gap' stemming from reliance on nominated bodies—a hallmark of the direct-rule régime—has been widened as a host of agencies have assumed the administration of formerly public services.

The advent of this new public management alerts us to another component of political activity, representation—not least, the quality of linkages between leaders and led. In a deeply divided society like Northern Ireland, where all roads tend to lead to the constitutional high ground, those linkages have proved crucial. Any deviation by party élites from the path towards either the maintenance of the union or Irish unification threatens a loss of support or even revolt among their respective electorates.

The premium placed on exclusive political testaments sidelines both other interests and those who seek to speak to, and for, them. In effect, the clamour to control the high ground consigns these others to the foothills of debate. Such has been the experience of women, for whom 'otherness' is a common, lived experience.

Bereft of all but tokenist treatment by Northern Ireland's political parties, and conspicuously absent from its elected tiers of representation, the prevailing culture of 'armed patriarchy' in the region has proved inimical to gender justice. Women have been ill served by its representational politics, although this is by no means a problem confined to Northern Ireland.

A major recent study of women's political participation in the region[3] reveals, however, that women are not content to acquiesce, lingering dutifully outside the men's rooms where what passes for politics takes place. There is compelling evidence, from both women and men, that the perceived interests of women are either subordinated or ignored by Northern Ireland's political parties. Among party identifiers, for instance, a majority of both sexes state unequivocally that

no party, including the one they support, serves women's interests—a quite damning indictment.

Of course, the concept of 'women's interest', and the representation of interests more broadly, is contested—not least within feminist discourse.[4] But other findings from the survey demonstrate clamorous support for policies and programmes to overcome the structural and situational constraints afflicting women, a strategy Pru Chamberlayne dubs 'gender recognition'.[5] A sister study of female councillors in Northern Ireland also reveals a shared, if submerged, agenda among the region's few elected women representatives, who are equally sensitive to the impediments preventing women from participating fully in political, social and economic life—in short, from enjoying the fruits of citizenship.[6]

Women are not deterred by the potential risks of entering the political arena in Northern Ireland; nor do they defer to the belief that politics is men's business. What does deter them is the obstacle course they face: an inequitable division of domestic labour, the paucity of childcare, generalised discrimination and the more particular effects of party selection procedures. And not only is the electorate *not* hostile to women politicians, but it associates characteristics sought in elected representatives—

ability to compromise, honesty, capacity for hard work and approachability—more with women than with men.

This is not predicated on an essentialist belief that only women can represent women. While a significant plurality of women (45 per cent) do believe things would improve if there were more of them in politics, this proportion is eclipsed by the endorsement by two thirds of women that female representation must be increased on grounds of fairness, equity and social justice. This support extends to the local, regional and national arenas of politics, which have been (and remain) virtually monopolised by men.

Explanations for the paucity of women in elected office vary across political systems, although everywhere they lack the drama of a single cause. While history and culture may supply part of the explanation, women have recently achieved unprecedented representation in their assemblies[7] in such traditionally patriarchal societies as Germany and the Republic of Ireland. There is also persuasive evidence that electoral systems can have differential effects.[8]

Globally, women do least well in first-past-the-post systems—for example, in the USA and UK—and tend to do best where list systems are employed, as in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

An intermediate (and very modest) representation is achieved in those relatively few countries with a single-transferable-vote system, as favoured by the republic and Malta.

The advantage of list systems, over first past the post, lies in having multi-member representation. This creates an incentive for parties to present a gender-balanced list of candidates, rather than opting only, or largely, for men. In single-member constituencies, conversely, parties may be inclined to 'play-safe' and select an identikit candidate: male, middle-aged and middle-class.

List systems also create the opportunity for parties to assist female candidates through affirmative action, including the adoption of quotas. The greater proportionality of list systems also increases party competition and turnover of elected members, whereas first past the post has an incumbency effect: the same member can be returned with monotonous regularity.

All other things being equal, such personnel turnover, as well as the proliferation of parties, does improve access to representative institutions for under-represented groups, women included. Party ideology has also been influential, however, in the number of women elected in countries with a regional list (for instance, Finland, Sweden and Norway) or a national one (Holland and Israel).

Generally speaking, party 'families' on the left, whether social-democratic or socialist, are for ideological reasons most likely to gender-proof selection practices. Those on the right, deploying a merit-based argument in choosing potential representatives, are least likely to do so. Once a party from one 'family' chooses to gender-proof its list, others often follow suit, while parties drawn from a competing 'family' may not.

Besides the interaction of electoral systems and selection practices, women are disadvantaged by occupational segregation. Randall notes the significance of 'eligibility enhancing professions', notably business and law, which seem almost to be a prerequisite of a career in politics, and which are of course male-dominated.[9]

While conventional wisdom and some social science research suggests there are individuated causes of women's absence from the political arenas—that they lack the experience, knowledge, skills, interest and confidence to enter the public fray—this is not an explanation strongly favoured by the general population. Apart from 'blaming the victim'—a convenient party alibi for not actively recruiting women candidates—it also ignores the disproportionately *high* participation of women in a wide range of

'small-p' political activities.

In effect, women have carved out a civic space between the orthodox public realm of politics and the private sphere of home and family. This space, in which a bewildering range of voluntary and community organisations flourish, is largely characterised by activity offering self-help for women, plugging the gaps of an inadequate welfare régime. It demonstrates that politics is in reality a seamless robe rather than a separate sphere and is testimony to the venerable adage 'the personal is political'.

Moreover, among such female activists, motives for participation are commonly inclusive. 'Communitarianism', expressed as a desire to serve the interests of others—irrespective of national or religious identities—is heavily pronounced. In addition, women are much more likely to stress self-fulfilment, thereby dovetailing self and other-directedness. These are motives inspired by a 'power to' effect change, rather than a determination to exert 'power over' others.

The ubiquity of women in this civic space can, of course, be rationalised as arising *faute de mieux*: they are clustered there because they are uninterested in the public arena of politics or they have nowhere else to go. Yet both interpretations diminish the wellsprings of such

activities. Moreover, the Northern Ireland Office has given tacit recognition to this form of expression by increasing the female beneficiaries of its patronage.[10]

Though they have not achieved parity with men on Northern Ireland's 128 nominated bodies, women constitute a growing proportion of appointees to this wide array of agencies and are not merely tucked into the folds of the political conflict out of harm's way. Criticised for exemplifying Northern Ireland's 'democratic deficit', these quangos have helped secure a place for women in the public realm denied by the parties.

Here we encounter a paradox—or, at least, a conundrum. If the nominated bodies were to be displaced by democratically elected alternatives, would women be decanted back into the margins of public life? Patronage has, numerically, proved advantageous for women, whereas electoral competition has not. Unless candidate selection procedures are changed, women may be better served through appointment than by relying on the parties to gender-proof selection.

The record of the region's parties in this regard should occasion real concern for a more settled political future. A majority of both men and women blame them for failing to provide women with

the opportunity to run for office. Coupled with the widespread condemnation of the parties for failing to represent the interests of women, they do emerge as villains of the piece in the public mind.

Selection procedures, jealously guarded by the parties' respective selectorates, are a key gatekeeper in shaping the gender balance of representatives. Given the proliferation of women in civic space, a shortage of supply of those well-versed in the skills, experience and knowledge needed for campaigning or fundraising is not evident; nor does the population at large believe women lack the individual resources for a political career. Rather, part of the answer to the under-representation of women in elected office lies in the demand for more female party candidates.

Lovenduski[11] has distinguished three alternative party strategies to attract women as candidates: the rhetorical, positive action and positive discrimination. The spectrum thus ranges from: mimicking the catchphrase of 'The Price is Right', exhorting women to 'come on down' yet doing nothing to pave their way; to measures such as training seminars, leadership courses or financial support for childcare; to adopting gender quotas or sanctioning women-only shortlists. In Northern Ireland, the rhetorical strategy is common to the major unionist parties, while positive action measures have been adopted, to some extent, by Alliance and both the Social Democratic and Labour party and Sinn Féin.[12] While the latter two have adopted gender quotas for internal party officers, neither has introduced positive discrimination in candidate selection; nor are they likely to in the wake of the industrial tribunal ruling in Leeds earlier this year against women-only shortlists in the Labour party.

Whatever strategies are adopted by political parties the fact is, as Lovenduski[13] reminds us, that increasing women's elected profile will rest largely on their own efforts. The choice of a list system for the Northern Ireland forum/talks election was, on the basis of evidence elsewhere, advantageous for women. Among other things, publication of candidate lists *may* to some extent have deterred parties from packing the top of their lists with men, or grouping women at their feet. And the lists themselves created the motive and opportunity for women within parties to campaign for their inclusion on an equitable basis.

But what added spice to the election was the appearance of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. With rare exceptions, the electoral success of women's

parties around the world has been underwhelming. But the coalition's entry into the campaign did somewhat concentrate the minds of other parties on gender politics—not least the very issue of candidate selection.

And it was on that issue that the coalition marshalled its support. While there is convincing evidence, amongst most women (and many men) in Northern Ireland, of an agenda of gender issues that transcends communal divisions, the belief that there should be more women in elected office is much more pronounced. It is a belief that rests largely on a commitment to fairness and justice, rather than the view that only women can represent women.

The population isn't starry-eyed about the ability of women representatives to usher in an era of settled peace and sweet reasonableness. Moreover, women do not regard themselves as having the future in their bones and they are no more likely than men to believe that the past is a foreign or forgotten country. Nor is there a gender cleavage in Northern Ireland concerning the rights and wrongs of political violence or the constitutional future of the region.

There is, though, evidence of a women's culture which, as Hedlund[14] observes, has two faces: a negative aspect that embraces passivity, lack of self-confidence and dependence on men; and a positive dimension emphasising connectedness, care for others and co-operative, non-aggressive behaviour. This, she argues, exists as "an invisible sphere suppressed in the world of men" but it "carries a potential for change and liberation that affects the entire society".[15] Activist women engaged in a wide gamut of informal participation across Northern Ireland, as well as the region's female councillors, do tend to exhibit a more consensual and coalescent political style.

There are real risks—both ideological and practical—in stressing difference between women and men, whether conceived in essentialist or material terms, or in assuming that women compose a monolithic bloc of potential voters. Yet the parties would be well advised to recognise that the electorate is acutely aware of the disadvantages women face and is receptive to proposals to remove them. In that respect the Women's Coalition will have succeeded if it constrains the major parties to address the issue of representation in gender-justice terms.

Whether or not a critical mass of women would make a substantive difference to political outcomes is a largely, and in Northern Ireland wholly, untested proposition. There is, though, buoyant and widespread public support for the

view that women should be fully included in the processes through which those outcomes are decided. While 'parity of esteem' has entered the standard lexicon of Northern Ireland politics, it will remain an empty phrase unless and until the majority of the population—women—achieve numerical equality. ▫️

Footnotes

[1] Robin Wilson, *Reconstituting Politics*, DD report 3, Belfast, 1996, p3

[2] Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964, p20

[3] Robert Miller, Rick Wilford and Freda Donoghue, *Women and Political Participation in Northern Ireland*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996. The survey upon which the book is based was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. The results have been deposited in the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex, ref R000232726.

[4] Most texts on feminist theory address the issue of 'women's interests'. See, for instance, Mary Evans ed, *The Woman Question*, second edition, Sage, London, 1994; Gisela Bock and Susan James eds, *Beyond Equality and Difference*, Routledge, London, 1992; C L Bacchi, *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990; Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992; Maggie Humm ed, *Feminisms: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1992; Diana Coole, *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*, second edition, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1993; and Kathleen B Jones and Anna G Jonasdottir eds, *The Political Interests of Gender*, Sage, London, 1988.

[5] Pru Chamberlayne, 'Women and the state: changes in roles and rights in France, West Germany, Italy and Britain, 1970-1990' in Jane Lewis ed, *Women and Social Policies in Europe*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1993, pp 170-193

[6] Rick Wilford, Robert Miller, Yolanda Bell and Freda Donoghue, 'In their own voices: women councillors in Northern Ireland', *Public Administration*, vol 71, no 3, autumn 1993, pp 341-355

[7] See Eva Kolinsky, 'Party change and women's representation in unified Germany' and Yvonne Galligan, 'Party politics and gender in the Republic of Ireland', in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris eds, *Gender and Party Politics*, Sage, London, 1993, pp 113-67

[8] Pippa Norris, 'Political participation', in M Githens, P Norris and J Lovenduski eds, *Different Roles, Different Voices: Women and Politics in the United States and Europe*, Harper Collins, New York, 1994, pp 25-26; Wilma Rule, 'Electoral systems, contextual factors and women's opportunity for election in 23 democracies', *Western Political Quarterly*, vol 34, March 1987, pp 477-98

[9] Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics* (2nd edition), Macmillan, London, 1987

[10] As regards government, between 1991 and 1995 the proportion of women serving on Northern Ireland's nominated bodies increased from 25 per cent to 32 per cent (Central Secretariat, Northern Ireland Office).

[11] Joni Lovenduski, 'Introduction: the dynamics of gender and party', in Lovenduski and Norris eds, op cit (1993), pp 1-15

[12] Rick Wilford, 'Women and politics in Northern Ireland', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 49, no 1, January 1996, pp 41-54

[13] Lovenduski, op cit (1993)

[14] Gun Hedlund, 'Women's interests in local politics', in Jones and Jonasdottir, op cit, pp 79-105

[15] ibid, p82

Conclusion

Thumbs up for more women in government

Kate Fearon

The homogeneity of Northern Ireland's political representatives remains as stark as ever. If it is a function of a democracy to be representative and reflective of the population, Northern Ireland is clearly lacking.

Since women in political parties themselves encounter problems—not so much a glass ceiling, more a very sticky floor—what then do women outside party politics do for representation? What avenues does the state provide? Are these satisfactory? How might any new institutional framework for women be legitimated?

Roisín McDonough has outlined the experience of women in the voluntary and community sectors. But women in other walks of life also organise as women, or operate for women. Conservative estimates suggest there are more than 1,000 groups working for or by women in Northern Ireland—that's about one for every 750 women in the region. These span church, disability, mother-and-toddler, charitable, business, voluntary, community and lobbying concerns.

This suggests two things: that many women clearly identify as women and that they organise as such. Geographical location, class, colour, religion, educational background are irrelevant: at every level women are creating and maintaining a space for themselves which society, as they have experienced it, has failed to provide. The localised nature of many of the groups suggests that the principle of autonomy is important, and by extrapolation that 'subsidiarity'—requiring that decisions be taken as closely as possible to the citizens affected by them—would feature in any political programmes such groups might deliver, were they in a position to do so.

Existing autonomous provision is, for the most part, self-generated, with some (usually non-recurrent and non-guaranteed) assistance from the state. A triad of frameworks delivers services specifically for women in the region: the non-governmental, semi-govermental[1] and governmental sectors. The groups they are required to accommodate can be codified into five types: community, research, networking, education and advocacy.

Community-based groups are the most common. These respond, usually locally, to the needs of women practically defined. They operate for their group members or for women in the immediate area. They may come together to solve a local problem, to exchange information, or to offer or enjoy support. Very few have a feminist agenda or are fired by feminism in any way; if anything, there is a rejection of a feminist label, however "woman-centred" or "womanist"[2] their

activities may be.

Many such women, while pursuing a *de facto* feminist path, identify feminism with those polarised media images which ridicule its ideals. As Michele Kirsch says, "Feminism, the word, as opposed to the ideal, has a bit of an image crisis. Too many people, too many women, have taken the lazy option of associating the word with its caricature instead of its character."[3] In those terms, the majority of women and men in Northern Ireland adopt the lazy option.[4]

While most such groups work within their own communities, there are some examples of well-established inter-group work, such as the Belfast-based Women's Information Group. But very few of these groups devote energy to changing policy—their concerns are with the immediacy of women's lives. The bigger women's centres and network groups like the Women's Support Network may work on a policy level, but their capacity to do so region-wide is limited by, *inter alia*, lack of resources.

Research groups with a broader policy outlook are more likely to be found in the academy or the public sector, and are not autonomous in the community sense. The Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland (EOCNI) and the Centre for Research on Women (based at the University of Ulster) are regular producers of salient research, but there are constraints on their and others' advocacy of their findings.

There are fewer region-wide advocacy groups. Those that are identify closely with feminism, and tend to use the research produced in the region to support their causes. Groups campaigning for reproductive rights, lesbian and bisexual women's rights, or equality for women in 'national' and European politics work at this level. They are likely to have national or international associates, and often support comes from these quarters. The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), instrumental in the formation of the Women's Coalition, is a prime example.

Likely also to be affiliates of national and international parent bodies are networking groups. The Business and Professional Women (BPW), church groupings, the Women's Institute and so on operate region-wide and nationally, for their own membership.

The Women's Resource and Development Agency and the Opportunities for Women Learning project of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) are the two biggest training and education providers for women in the region, aiming mostly at adult woman returners. While many other groups will design and provide training initiatives for their

memberships, the WRDA and OWL programmes have the greatest number of participants, and are able to offer both continuity and development in their courses year by year, on a regional basis.

There is, then, a raft of organisations in Northern Ireland, diverse in size and nature—autonomous and non-autonomous; state, semi-state and non-state; some subscribing to a feminist agenda, some rejecting such a definition—but all working for and run chiefly by women. The United Kingdom government readily acknowledges the work women do in the non-governmental sector[5] and the contribution they have made to progress in Northern Ireland, where many non-governmental organisations have relatively easy access to government.

There is a 'national' machinery for women in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. In London, there is a cabinet sub-committee on women's issues, with supporting networks of officials and the independent Equal Opportunities Commissions.[6] It has supported the proposal for a United Nations rapporteur on violence against women, and has signed up to the European Union's Third Medium Term Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. In Northern Ireland, an Interdepartmental Group on Women's Issues, made up of officials from all the departments and the Northern Ireland Office, is examining the funding of women's groups in the region, and plans to examine issues of domestic violence, childcare and public appointments.[7]

There is also the Women's National Commission, publicly-funded but operationally independent, which is recognised as a means of consulting UK women on a wide range of policy issues, "aiming to ensure that women's views are given due weight in government".[8] The work of the commission does not, in effect, extend to Northern Ireland: it has only one representative from the region, drawn from the Women's Forum, whose membership of some 30 organisations derives almost exclusively from a networking base[9] and which does not consult more widely in any formal sense.

In the republic, a Department of Equality and Law Reform was established in 1993, with responsibility to ensure equality became a reality through institutional, administrative and legal reform. There is also an Employment Equality Agency, which has a remit to work towards the elimination of discrimination in employment and to keep the operation of anti-discrimination law under review. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Women's Rights, embracing

parliamentarians from both houses, has been in operation since 1983. Its terms of reference include consideration of how any areas of discrimination against women can be eliminated and obstacles to their full participation in political, social and economic life removed.

The National Women's Council of Ireland, while funded almost entirely by government, is independent in policy terms and is answerable only to an executive committee elected from its members—NGOs representative wholly or mainly of women's interests and concerns. It is recognised by government as the body which puts forward women's concerns and perspectives and is perceived as an informed and constructive critic of policy initiatives. Its leaders enjoy ready access to senior politicians and policy-makers. While it has a much higher profile than its UK counterpart, the Women's National Commission, for Northern Ireland women this is largely irrelevant since effectively they fall between the two pillars on which each government consults and is lobbied on women-identified issues.

This sketch gives some flavour of what women have done for themselves—with little and uncertain assistance from the state—and of the structures government has established. But women should not have to organise their own

representation and the issue of representation in formal arenas will not go away. A number of commentators have recently called for greater cohesion among all these avenues through which a 'woman's voice' is articulated in Northern Ireland. Some have called for a separate 'department of women's affairs',[10] arguing that women are so marginalised that they need a place 'to focus energy on'. Others[11] have urged that a second chamber with a gender balance should complement any more conventional democratic structure, or that there should be an elected women's assembly.

Since so much is currently available, albeit with no guarantees of permanence, it might be better for the moment to look to existing institutional arrangements, and see if they could combine to offer a more focused and enduring pathway for the advancement of women in all aspects of politics and society in Northern Ireland.

Many platforms have been created over the years, including in recent times,[12] to discuss formal politics and how women's participation might be enhanced. Common problems arise: resources, administration, access and so on. Many such events have been or are organised on a part-time, even voluntary, basis; many of the groups described above have been involved in one or other of

them. Each conference or report is informative and useful in itself—but their sporadic nature, reliance on goodwill, lack of funding and almost guaranteed non-coverage by the regional media are all less than satisfactory.

Many conference delegates call for the same things. Government attends some of them, and may provide money for another. But there is neither overall strategy nor a group that will take all the recommendations, design a platform for action and oversee—even on the government's behalf—implementation. Many groups have the will, but not the time or money, to do so. Thus, many recommendations fall by the wayside, if invariably revisited when similar conferences are convened.

A first step towards cohesion and focus would be to describe and explain the number, role and inter-relationships of all the groups claiming to represent or work for women. A Northern Ireland Convention on Women (NICOW) could undertake this task over 18 months. It would also have a secondary remit to make recommendations on the means, administrative and legislative, by which women would be able to participate on equal terms and conditions with men in economic, social, political and cultural life; to this end, it could consider

the efficacy and feasibility of positive action measures.[13] Autonomous advocacy, of course, hidden or overt, underpins all of this.

The Fair Play initiative, established by the junior NIO minister Baroness Denton in early 1996, goes some way to presenting a model for this convention, but places emphasis almost exclusively on women recognising their skills and talents in order to contribute to the economy. In any event, at the time of writing its steering group had yet to report on its remit of drawing up "an action plan aimed at encouraging women to realise their full potential and to contribute to public life as well as to the economic well being of Northern Ireland".[14]

There have been many calls for an umbrella body, to provide consistency and guard against reinvention of the wheel, and to offer focus and voice to women's priorities and practices—with an emphasis on relatedness, inclusion of the personal dimension, valuing feelings and taking a long-term perspective. In a recent survey,[15] women point to the interconnections between economic, political and social systems and the need for an integrated approach which promotes social cohesion. Women in Northern Ireland are working in all of these areas, but at different times and at different speeds.

Any convention would need to

recognise itself as a reflexive rendezvous for responses at all levels. Key organisations to convene and serve on it, at least in the interim, would be the WRDA, the EOC, the WEA, NIWEP, BPW, the universities and trade unions. Representation of rural and urban community-based women's groups, and of younger women, would be essential.

The convention might consider models for an umbrella body, including the republic's National Women's Council and the UK National Women's Commission, both of which receive annual public funding. Women's groups in Northern Ireland are eligible to join the UK organisation, but not the southern one, although there are informal links. A Northern Ireland Regional Women's Council (NIRWC) could think long-term and strategically, enhancing communication and co-ordination between all groups working to advance the status of women.

Like many Northern Ireland bodies with 'extra-national' partners, such a council should be able to establish bilateral ties to both 'national' women's organisations, in London and Dublin.[16] While retaining an overall advocacy role, it could provide information and support around the five themes of current activity: community, research, networking, education and advocacy itself. Organisations involved in any of these areas would form the council membership.

The council might also be responsible for an annual or biennial Northern Ireland Gender Audit, such as that currently carried out for Scottish women by Engender,[17] and it could prepare or commission gender-impact assessments of proposed legislation. Lobbying, with others, for improvement of the UK's Gender Development Index[18] could be a wider concern, as would monitoring representation of women in the Northern Ireland media. It could also establish political clubs for women, facilitate autonomous meetings of women in localities and arrange dialogues between groups.

It might be feared such an organisation would quickly become élitist, losing touch with community-based groups. Such fears should be confronted by the convention in the first instance—an administrative base in mid-Ulster, or four regional bases, and sensitivity to the way groups organise might go some way to addressing them. But there also needs to be recognition of the need for a sustainable, well-resourced structure—accessible to, and promoting the advancement of, women in all arenas in Northern Ireland.

The broader political context, of course, remains highly volatile. Talks are under way to attempt to resolve the conflict, or at least to manage it more

LESLEY DOYLE

efficiently. As Elizabeth Meehan noted in an earlier DD report,[19] there is, though, a sense of a *tabula rasa*, an opportunity to write a new constitution, or settlement, which reflects the nexus of experiences in the region and internationally.

But the role and representation of women can get deprioritised in the building of any new society. Women are caught in a bind: they are not present in sufficient numbers—the critical mass pointed to by Deirdre Heenan and Anne Marie Gray in their chapter—to argue for major change in their status, or to push

women-identified issues up the policy agenda. Thus they are dependent on the outcome of any talks process.

Lessons from South Africa should be well heeded if we are to produce a fair and equitable society in Northern Ireland. There, the issue of women's representation and roles were taken seriously and mechanisms were set in train to favour greater participation of women in government. Closer to home, the Scottish Constitutional Convention acknowledged the failure of the British political system to give fair representation to women, and argued that a Scottish parliament would provide the opportunity for a new start: positive action should be taken to "allow women to play their full and equal part in the political process".[20] The gender equality envisaged for such a parliament should be replicated in Northern Ireland.

So, too, the Northern Ireland talks process needs to acknowledge the impact that various solutions, or settlements might have on the women of the region. For example, as Miller *et al* argue,[21] the consociational formula[22] "reinforces [the] dependency" of a women-identified agenda on male political élites securing agreement, held themselves to represent a society in which there are only two monolithic blocs. The activities of women's organisations, centres and groups, previously described, demonstrate that this does not reflect reality. Eilish Rooney has pointed out that while the framework document is ostensibly democratic and gender-free, its language is already "conceptually weighted, including by gender". It is not only electoral systems that need gender-proofed, but the negotiated settlement itself.

The political parties at the negotiating table have the capacity to contribute to enhancing the status of women in Northern Ireland. By providing exclusive space for women internally, parties have recognised *de facto* that their structures do not treat all equally—that there are particular problems of participation for a significant portion of their membership. Some parties are more aware of this than others, and have begun to incorporate quotas and other positive-action mechanisms to promote women's participation at executive levels. This represents a move forward, but parties should also examine why, particularly in terms of their decision-making processes, they are so unattractive to so many women.

Quotas are supposed to be a short-term device to redress an historically embedded imbalance. What is the point of continually injecting women into the process, if the culture which created the imbalance continues to prevail? Parties employing quotas should view them only as a first step to equality, and make use

of the competent women who now sit on their executives and policy groups—listening to their experiences and including them in the processes of policy formation and implementation.

A gender evaluation should be carried out by each party to identify what works and what doesn't, in party structures and stances, for their female membership. Those who have introduced quotas should also establish awareness and understanding of the system amongst the whole membership, identify resentment, and publish information on what targets (time- and number-specific) the quota system should reach before it is reviewed. Given that female members are unlikely to be critical of their party in public, these evaluations should be conducted confidentially by an independent evaluator.

For all parties, extending the 'woman space' internally to include direct input into policy and management decisions could be easily achieved. The list system of election used in the 1996 forum elections, as Rick Wilford has illustrated, offers an opportunity for parties to demonstrate real commitment to promoting women within their ranks. All it offered women this time, however, was the opportunity to see how precisely little parties cared about including them; all parties need to build women's confidence in them as vehicles for inclusive political expression.

In tandem, parties might consider establishing bi- or multi-lateral committees on women, to examine methods of increasing women's participation in any new systems of governance which are to be determined. They could also explore offering intra- or inter-party mentoring to women, whereby a female party member, councillor or talks delegate could be paired for a specified time with a more senior figure, learning new skills and gaining self-esteem in the process. The mentors could be male or female but, since there are few women at senior levels in parties, they are likely to be male—this could prove even more valuable, however, since it would militate against such schemes being sidelined.

While the parties are in a position to do something, and have important roles in influencing attitudinal change towards women, government also has the capacity to lead, both institutionally and in setting the climate. There is much international precedent on formatting policy which brings real change to women's lives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the London and Dublin governments are signatory, declares that everyone has the right to take part in the government of her/his country, and both governments[23]

have acceded to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. It is recognised internationally that improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of transparent and accountable government.[24]

It is recognised internationally that, in a world of continuing instability and violence, co-operative approaches to peace and stability are urgently needed. Equal access of women to power structures and full participation by them in all efforts to prevent and resolve conflict are essential. It is recognised internationally that fear of violence, including harassment, is a permanent constraint on the mobility of women and limits their access to resources and basic activities. Violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which they are forced into a subordinate position.

It is recognised internationally that particular provision does have to be made for women. In particular, the UN Charter on the Rights of Women allows of "temporary special measures" to redress inequalities. It is recognised by some domestic political parties that particular provision has to be made. None of this finds practical resonance, however, in Northern Ireland—where it is recognised by women that if they want to be

represented and to participate, they must do it themselves.

It has often been suggested that women are not interested in contesting elections or getting involved in formal politics—that they are somehow content to contribute alone to the parallel, but ultimately powerless, sphere of non-governmental organisations. The number of women who contested the forum elections—wherever they ranked on party lists—effectively debunks this myth. This rather showed instead the confidence, competence and desire of women to participate in the affairs of governance and in conflict resolution.

It is time government itself had the confidence to institutionalise an acknowledgement of women's contribution to society, giving it real expression in the design and implementation of policy. A new umbrella body for women in Northern Ireland should be accorded representative status as a full social partner.

While establishing a regional women's council would be a major undertaking, there are other, smaller things government could do with relative ease. These include increasing the number and enhancing the position of women on public bodies. A simple educational measure would be to include in the common school curriculum the UN declarations and conventions on women's rights and human

rights—particularly to equip girls with relevant information for later life.

But other agents of influence need to recognise their responsibilities—including, importantly, the media. The significance of role models can not be overstated and the directory of women contributors being prepared for programme-makers by the BBC is to be welcomed. UTV and the regional press would do well to embark on similar exercises. Training should be available for women and men in media organisations, to challenge cultures which are disadvantaging or derogatory towards women. Amidst the summer civil disorder across Northern Ireland, one newspaper, describing events in the Orange field at Edenderry, spoke of "a man and a fat woman in blue" dancing to accordion music.[25] As illustrated by Liz Fawcett in this report, women for the most part are presented as dependent on, and defined by, their appearance or their relationships to others—usually to a man, but also to children, parents or employers.

Inequality in access to power, inequality of status in society. Lack of education and training. Lack of resources. Lack of childcare facilities. Gross under-representation in all the key decision-making bodies and policy arenas. Such are the positionings of women in Northern Ireland—active and able in spheres far

removed from sites of power, kept out of sites where real decisions are made. It is therefore all the more essential to have equal representation in key policy areas, so that the particular experience, knowledge and expertise of women can inform priorities, decisions and practice.

Ann Phillips observes that any system of representation which consistently excludes the voices of women is not just unfair; it does not begin to count as representation.[26] Northern Ireland patently presents such a system—it cannot continue. There is capacity for all significant actors to propose and implement change, and this report has made some suggestions as to achievable actions which are available to them.

But there has to be a will to do so. Cultural change must be concomitant with constitutional or institutional change—not contingent upon it. DD

Footnotes

[1] These are bodies which receive recurrent funding from the state but are independent of it. This category includes, for example, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Workers' Educational Association.
[2] R Miller, R Wilford and F Donoghue, *Women and Political Participation in Northern Ireland*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996, p244
[3] Cited in Women's Communication Centre, *Values and Visions: The Report from the What Women Want Social Survey*, London, 1996, p1
[4] Fieldwork by Miller et al found that only 23.9

per cent of female respondents identified with a feminist label, as did 13.5 per cent of males. But on a scale of 1-10 supporting the perceived aims of the women's movement, the same respondent groups located themselves at 6.2 and 5.8 (op cit, p220). Those who rejected a feminist label had a media-inspired view of feminists' chief activity as bra-burning.

[5] For example, see the *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: National Report of the UK*, HMSO, London, 1994, p27

[6] England, Scotland and Wales are all subsumed into the 'British' EOC.

[7] *UN Fourth World Conference on Women National Report of the UK*, p136

[8] ibid, p25

[9] Organisations like Queen's University Women's Graduates, church groups, and Business and Professional Women are members of the Women's Forum.

[10] For example, Annie Campbell of the Downtown Women's Centre in Belfast holds this view.

[11] See *Women, Politics and Ways Forward*, the report of a conference held in the Rural College, Draperstown, in 1995.

[12] Conference and project reports abound. See note 11, plus *Women and Citizenship* , Belfast, 1995 and *Women Shaping the Future*, Belfast, 1996.

[13] This is drawn from the terms of reference of the Second Commission on the Status of Women in the republic, established in 1990.

[14] Fair Play leaflet, HMSO, June 1996

[15] *Values and Visions*, op cit, p10

[16] The student movement pioneered this both/and, rather than either/or, approach to Northern Ireland's unique constitutional positioning.

[17] Engender is a research and campaigning organisation for women in Scotland. It produces an annual Gender Audit which examines the role and status of women in terms of health, childcare, housing, education, law, ethnic minorities, poverty, media and the arts.

[18] A country's Gender Development Index is determined by the UN Development Programme. Ranking 174 countries on overall quality of life—as measured by education and literacy, life expectancy and income—generates the Human Development Index. The GDI is the HDI weighted according to gender equity. The 1996 report ranks the UK 16th and the republic 19th in the world on both indices.

[19] 'Democracy unbound', *Reconstituting Politics*, DD report 3, Belfast, 1996, pp 23-40

[20] *A Report to the Scottish Constitutional Convention from the Executive Committee*, Edinburgh, 1992, p35

[21] Op cit, pp 244-5

[22] See Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, University of California Press, 1968; Brendan O'Leary, 'The limits of coercive consociationalism in Northern Ireland', *Political Studies*, vol 37, 1989, pp 562-88.

[23] The republic's government has entered reservations on a number of sections.

[24] *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women* (unedited advance text), New York, 1995, §G181

[25] 'Every colour under the sun except green', *Irish News*, July 13th 1996

[26] Ann Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, 1993, p63

Contributors

Kate Fearon is assistant director of Democratic Dialogue

Liz Fawcett was a reporter and correspondent with BBC Northern Ireland before taking up her current post as lecturer in media studies at the University of Ulster

Ann Marie Gray and **Deirdre Heenan** are lecturers in social policy at UU

Rick Wilford is a lecturer on the politics and policy of the UK, and on women and politics, at Queen's University, Belfast

Eilish Rooney is a lecturer in the School of Social and Community Development Science at UU

Roisín McDonough is Making Belfast Work team leader for North Belfast and former chair of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

democratic

dialogue

publications

Report 1: New Thinking for New Times

DD's launch conference took place in more optimistic, post-ceasefire times. But it opened up new horizons with which Northern Ireland must in any event come to terms. Internationally, the context is of globalisation and detraditionalisation, where all that is solid melts into air, bringing a contest between fundamentalist retreats to old certitudes and the search for a 'dialogic democracy' based on pluralism and negotiation. The conference also embraced the dramatic modernisation in the last decade of the state beyond Northern Ireland's border, with its lessons for 'social partnership' and engagement with the wider Europe. And it culminated with a unique democratic exercise determining the work on which DD should embark. This stimulating report re-presents the conference's many still relevant themes, including the keynote address by Prof Anthony Giddens.

Report 2: Social Exclusion, Social Inclusion

Can north Down ever come to see itself as showing solidarity with north Belfast? Northern Ireland is a deeply fractured society, and by no means on sectarian lines alone. In this era of fiscal retrenchment, must 'the poor always be with us'? This ambitious report says no. It offers a detailed analysis of social exclusion, and responses to it, in the UK, France and the US, before charting its key dimensions in Northern Ireland. It recognises that dealing with social exclusion does not come cheaply and nor can government, political parties, trade unions and many others avoid the

ultimately moral challenge it poses. The report presents bold conclusions, which would shake up the governance structure of Northern Ireland, establish new sources of revenue and introduce radical policy initiatives towards a more inclusive society.

Report 3: Reconstituting Politics

In post-post-ceasefire Northern Ireland, the failure of politics is all the more striking. Written before the latest round of multi-party talks on the future of the region, this report predicted their inability to resolve the complex nest of problems. It urges a fundamental rethink of what politics in Northern Ireland is about and looks to ways in which the political process can be opened up and a sclerotic political class renewed. It explores the normally neglected world of quango-land, likely to continue to dominate the political landscape for the foreseeable future, and how it can be rendered more transparent and accessible. It draws on democratic experiments elsewhere to suggest a raft of ways in which citizens can become more involved in decisions relating to the governance of the regions. And it concludes with original ideas for a reconstruction of Northern Ireland's political agenda and a practical plan for a viable, post-conflict, democratic polity.

"creative ... a positive vision"—Edward Mortimer, foreign editor, *Financial Times*
"brilliant"—Joyce McMillan, columnist, *Scotland on Sunday*
"deserves to be very widely read"—John Bradley, associate professor, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin
"In a country where politics is dominated by age-encrusted stances and where political debate consists solely of stubborn, sectarian rhetoric, Democratic Dialogue is a breath of fresh air"—*Gown* (a Queen's University Belfast student newspaper)

All reports available from DD, 5 University Street, Belfast BT7 1FY; tel: 01232-232228/232230; fax: 01232-232228/233334; e-mail: dd@dem-dial.demon.co.uk. Price £7.50 (£4.50 unwaged), £10 institutions; add 10 per cent p&p.