



WOMEN & PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What started as a movement for civil rights in Northern Ireland in 1968 descended into a violent conflict that lasted three decades. As Catholics demanded the same rights as their Protestant neighbors, vicious cycles of police brutality, riots, armed clashes, and bombings ensued.

The Troubles, as the war became known, opened long-festered wounds: with most Catholics and nationalists wishing to reunify with the Republic of Ireland, the majority of Protestant and unionists wished for Northern Ireland to remain as part of the United Kingdom.

Paramilitary groups emerged on both sides, and the British army was deployed. Until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the Troubles claimed some 3,600 lives.

While women were vigorously engaged in the civil rights movement and labor activism in Northern Ireland, they were far less likely than men to participate in formal politics to address their grievances. Only nine women had served in the Parliament of Northern Ireland in its half-century of existence before the British government suspended the body to exercise direct rule from 1972 to 1998. Community divisions and violence plagued politics in Northern Ireland. Activist Cathy Harkin described the culture as “armed patriarchy.”

Only nine women had served in the Parliament of Northern Ireland in its half-century of existence before the British government suspended the body to exercise direct rule from 1972 to 1998.

But during the Troubles, women’s civic engagement blossomed in community-based nongovernmental organizations on both sides of the conflict divide. In 1977, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan won the Nobel Peace Prize for their work organizing cross-community peace groups. By the time a window opened in the 1990s for a new political process to establish peace, many women who had previously felt excluded from conventional politics stood ready to demand a seat at the table.

Following paramilitary ceasefires and diplomatic advances in the early 1990s, the British and Irish governments announced multi-party talks on the future of Northern Ireland would begin in 1996.

Peace talks typically prioritize the participation of governments, armed groups, and political parties, which all tend to be dominated by men. But the unusual design of public elections to the talks in Northern Ireland created an opening for women in civil society. A group of Catholic and Protestant women from working and middle class backgrounds came together to form the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition and gain representation at the negotiation table.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition laid out a policy platform focused on achieving human rights, equality, and inclusion—to help make all voices heard in determining Northern Ireland's future.

In light of this commitment to inclusivity, the coalition became trusted intermediaries once elected to the peace talks. They were able to build strong relationships with parties on each side of the conflict divide and helped the mediator and other officials gauge different parties' positions on a given issue through backchannel communications. As such, they promoted dialogue and built trust to advance the peace process, even as progress stalled and some parties were excluded from the talks.

In addition, the Women's Coalition had an agenda of its own for the peace agreement. It succeeded in ensuring the accord addressed issues vital to social cohesion in the post-conflict period, with provisions addressing reconciliation, victims' recognition, integrated education, mixed housing, and a stronger voice for community leaders in the legislative process.

After 26 months of negotiations, eight Northern Irish political parties and the British and Irish governments signed the Good Friday Agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement. The Women's Coalition leveraged its relationships with civic organizations to mount a dynamic campaign that significantly influenced public support for the accord. An overwhelming 71% of the electorate voted in favor of the agreement in a public referendum.

The Good Friday Agreement paved the way for a transition to democratic politics, providing for a nationalist and unionist power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. It laid the foundation for demilitarization and a decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.

Unionists were assured that Northern Ireland would remain in the United Kingdom as long as this represented the will of the majority of residents. Nationalists were promised closer cooperation with the Republic of Ireland's government, greater equality, police reform, and both communities would see prisoner releases.

In the 20 years since this landmark accord, Northern Ireland has made significant progress on the uncertain path toward long-term peace. Nonetheless, the delicate power-sharing arrangement has also experienced crises, most recently leading to the suspension of Northern Ireland's government in January 2017.

Although women's participation in politics has increased, women remain virtually absent from the bodies created to monitor the peace process' implementation.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition laid out a policy platform focused on achieving human rights, equality, and inclusion—to help make all voices heard in determining Northern Ireland's future.