9 'Mother Ireland, Get Off Our Backs'

Republican Feminist Resistance in the North of Ireland

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Introduction

Feminist organizing in Northern Ireland garnered international attention in the wake of the peace process that ended the military campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This process gave birth to the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, an all-female political party that claimed to span the ethnonational divide between Catholics and Protestants. The Coalition was drenched in the global limelight and heralded as a success for a feminist politics of peace. This particular history of the Troubles has, however, skewed the mapping of feminist organizing in the North as the over-emphasis on the Coalition comes at the expense of a vast array of feminist groups and campaigns. More broadly, the tendency to emphasize the 'bridge-building' politics has led to a dominant narrative of women's organizing in the North that is far from holistic.

Women organizing under the rubric of republicanism offers one such example of an understudied contribution to the feminist landscape. While the roles undertaken by women during the Troubles remain under-examined relative to their male counterparts (McDowell 2008), a limited body of scholarship does try to account for women's involvement in republicanism and the republican armed struggle (Alison 2009; Aretxaga 1997; Bloom 2011; Dowler 1998; Gilmartin 2013; O'Keefe 2013; Sharoni 2001). Despite these contributions, research that analyzes republican women's organizing as feminists is almost non-existent bar a few notable exceptions (Cockburn 1998; Rooney 1995; Roulston 1997). Republican feminist politics are, for the most part, hidden from view. To be sure, icons like Bernadette Devlin McAliskey are easily recognisable as feminist actors within the wider republican movement but how these feminists organized as *republican feminists* is significantly less celebrated. As a consequence, the contributions of this form of feminist resistance are in danger of being written out of history despite the saturation of scholarship on the Troubles.

This chapter, in the first instance, contributes to the widening of a Northern Irish feminist genealogy as it charts the development, success, and failures of republican feminism – the feminist organizing undertaken

by those who identify as both feminist and republican. Republican feminism is also situated within a social movement context to reveal the tensions and tribulations that plagued wider feminist organizing during the war. Thus, the chapter also speaks to the ways in which social movements are themselves boundary makers, and how agendas are shaped not just internally but across social movements. In divided societies, where borders are more starkly drawn (Todd et al. 2006), material, symbolic, and physical boundaries serve to encase and shape social movements. Boundary work is more acute in this context and, as such, republican feminism has much to show us about this process, including the constraints and opportunities of agenda setting and movement-building. Relatedly, this research also builds on the question of why actors join high-risk movements as posed by White and Demirel-Pegg (in this volume). Why did women who were not initially republican feel feminism was bettered through republicanism than the women's movement? As Nancy Whittier (2014) documents, feminism comprises many struggles and feminists active in such struggles do so in an array of social movements and not necessarily in the autonomous women's movement, as is the case with republican feminism. Many women, as explored through this chapter, chose to organize as feminists through republicanism not just because they identified with republicanism but also for reasons connected to class, state repression, and the perceived exclusionary nature of the Northern Irish women's movement. This story is meaningful not only for the articulation of difficulties that arise when organizing in a conflict zone; the analysis also offers compelling insight into how collective identification is shaped by both negative and positive relational experiences (Gamson 1995).

The research for this work is part of a larger project on Irish republican feminism and is based on a feminist ethnography that began in 2000 and concluded in 2007. The data in this article consists primarily of 20 qualitative, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with women active within the republican movement during the Troubles. Interviews were obtained through snowballing with the help of two key gatekeepers who are former republican prisoners. Themes covered by the interviews spanned a range of topics from prior political activism, motivations for joining the republican movement (including the IRA), gender roles within the movement, feminism, and relationships with other groups and campaigns. Documentary research and artefact analysis of political party manifestos, pamphlets, murals, and political ephemera are also an integral part of this feminist ethnography. The research suggests that republican feminism was ignited and shaped by a number of key factors. It formed into a coherent, critical feminist project

that positively impacted the lives of women in working-class republican communities across the North, as well as the wider republican and women's movements.

Republican Feminist Praxis

Republican feminism is not derived from any written manifesto as such but its presence is strongly felt in the community as well is in more formal political structures. It is a collective identity, fluid and relational (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 298), 'located in action and interaction', formed through relationships as opposed to any identification formed through individual self-conceptions (Whittier 1995: 16; Melucci 1995). Republican feminism has been shaped over time by four key factors: a historical connection between feminism and Irish nationalism, politicization and 'gender awareness' from experiences with gender-based state violence, feminist politicization around prison struggles, and a marginalization of republican women by both the republican movement and the broader women's movement.

Those who identify as republican feminist claim it to be a radical politics flavoured with Marxist/socialist tendencies rooted in the material realities of working-class women. Some depict it as an all-encompassing view that speaks to broader issues of autonomy, equality, and social justice. Republican and lesbian feminist activist Claire Hackett explains the approach best when she defined it as a commitment to 'self-determination':

> The concept of self-determination is what best defines republican feminism for me. This concept is perhaps better known for its nationalist than its feminist connotations. Yet, it must be clear that it has meaning for feminist discourse – self-determination as the right and ability to make real choices about our lives: our fertility, our sexuality, childcare, the means to be independent in all the areas in which we are currently denied autonomy and dignity in our various identities as women. (1995: 11)

The British occupation of the North is considered to be the main source of women's oppression as it shapes all political, economic, and social structures. The late Mairéad Farrell, perhaps the most illustrious female IRA volunteer, claimed women in the North are doubly oppressed: 'I am oppressed as a woman, and I'm also oppressed as an Irish person. Everyone in this country is oppressed and yet we can only end our oppression as women if we end the oppression of our nation as a whole' (Derry Film and Video Collective

1988). Farrell also suggested women were not taken seriously as political actors by republicans or wider society due to traditional gender norms, including those rooted in nationalistic tropes. She claimed the republican prisoners in Armagh women's prison felt hampered by societal expectations regarding motherhood and femininity emblematic in the trope of Mother Ireland. Republican feminism can thus be understood as an attempt to disrupt such norms, to say 'Mother Ireland, get off our back [sic]' (Derry Film and Video Collective 1988).

Republican feminism, situated in the context of the broader struggle for an end to British imperialism in Ireland, has taken on many forms of the years. Its origins lie in grass-roots organizing though it quickly bled into the formal political realm as republicanism increasingly engaged in electioneering. Though there have been many groups connected to republican feminism since the start of the Troubles and, as a result, differences abound, at the core of this organizing is a belief that partition has put a particular shape on gender relations on the island of Ireland.

Historical Contexts

The first factor to give rise to republican feminism was the pre-existing relationship between Irish nationalism and feminism. Feminist nationalist icons active in the 1916 Easter Rising like Constance Markievicz and Helena Moloney continue to serve as role models to most republican women (Ward 1983). While, as Connolly (2003) suggests, the suffragettes had victories independent of the nationalist movement, for many the two struggles were inextricable. Markievicz made clear the relationship between women's position in Irish society and the national question when in 1909 she wrote that the 'first step on the road to freedom is to realise ourselves as Irishwomen – not as Irish or merely as women, but as Irishwomen doubly enslaved and with a double battle to fight' (as cited in Owens 2005: 112). Cumann na mBan's formation in 1914 pronounced the tensions between those who wished to place primacy on the suffragette movement and those who favoured prioritizing the national struggle. Noted suffragette Hanna Sheehy Skeffington felt the women's question was not taken seriously enough within nationalist quarters and registered her disdain for those women who chose to join Cumann na mBan in a letter to the *Irish Times* denouncing the organization as nothing more than an 'animated collecting box' for men (Owens 2005: 115). Nevertheless, as Diarmaid Ferriter (2004: 218) argues, many women took on multi-dimensional roles that spanned these

two key movements (Ferriter 2004: 217-218). The visibility and celebration of historic feminist nationalist figures normalized the presence of women and feminist ideas within the republican movement (Sales 1997).

Gendered State Violence and Politicization

The development of contemporary feminist nationalism though inspired by the actions its foremothers was predominantly instigated through a response to the violence of the British state. When the Troubles erupted in 1968, women were primarily located within the home. With political, economic, and social marginalization of working-class Catholics, the introduction of British soldiers to the streets of the North, and atrocities such as Bloody Sunday, many women became involved in the resistance movement that developed in response to these repressions. The experience of state violence can be considered a 'moral shock' (Jasper 1997) for some respondents insofar as it forced many women to engage in a politics of resistance for the first time in their lives. One republican feminist activist and former IRA member explains:

> Growing up in the early seventies [...] there were riots every night, CS gas, Catholics being burnt out of their houses. All this madness was around you daily. I was swept up in what was happening. I joined gCaílní na hÉireann, the junior wing of the IRA, when I was thirteen. Unconsciously I became more politically aware. At sixteen I joined the army. (Interview No. 13)

Similarly, another former IRA volunteer and republican feminist states, 'I grew up in the conflict and war was all around. I gained a political awareness when I was twelve or thirteen and I started asking questions about who is responsible for all of this' (Interview No. 12). These women are 'reluctant guerrillas', a term Jocelyn Viterna uses to describe women who joined revolutionary movements out of necessity (2006: 24), as they felt they were left with no other options but to fight back. This process of politicization is commonly recognized by social movement scholars as symptomatic of the lived experience of hardship and oppression around which grievances and mobilizations are based (Piven and Cloward 1977; Nilsen and Cox 2013).

Republican feminism thus arose, in part, from a process of politicization acquired through engagement in community resistance. Women remarked that their 'increased involvement in political activity gave them a new sense

of identity'. A former female political prisoner compared the politicization of women in republican communities to the shift in gender roles that took place during the Second World War, particularly in relation to internment when women were left almost entirely to run the communities and the movement as men were in prison or on the run: 'Women took over from the men, everything that they did. But, unlike that [WWII], after internment when the men returned, women stayed there and excelled at things. They didn't go back into the home because men expected them to [...] Nothing's ever been the same since' (Interview No. 5).

Experiences of state violence motivated republican women to engage in a politics of resistance which in turn fostered a 'gender awareness' brought sharply into focus through a realization that the violence of the state was gendered. Because of the gender roles in Irish society, women – women's bodies, in particular – became the interface at which the struggle for power in the North was fought. At that time women were less likely to work outside the home, they brought the children to school, did the shopping during the day and, when internment was first introduced, made up the majority in housing estates as men were either on the run or locked up. Women had to contend with continual house raids and street interrogations by security forces as they carried out their daily routine. In addition, women led the street resistance against the state, forming 'hen patrols' to warn of approaching army patrols, breaking state-imposed curfews, and disrupting everyday army blockades.

While sectarian harassment by security forces was commonplace (McVeigh 1994), women experienced sexual harassment on countless occasions (Pickering 2002: 37). Sexual slurs and jeers at their bodies were often part of the verbal assaults in attempts to sexualize women and make them uncomfortable. In addition to being called a 'slut', 'Irish whore' or 'Provie blanket', references to rape were also made. Such comments were made by soldiers in passing foot patrols, driving Land Rovers, or even standing in watchtowers where women were easily scrutinized (Harris and Healy 2001: 69, 85, 89). This harassment was so commonplace that women typically considered them normal or 'just the usual' (Interview No. 18).

Sexualized violence and harassment was also found inside detention centres and jails. Sexual overtones, slurs, and actions were frequently used as a means of intimidation during interrogation while some go so far as to suggest multiple cases of 'rape, threats of rape, and technical rape' committed by the army and the RUC in the North (Harris and Healy 2001; McCafferty 1981: 34). More than one interviewee reported experiences with sexual violence at the hands of state forces and their stories ranged from threats of rape to harassment and assault (Interview No. 18; Interview No. 21A; O'Keefe 2013).

The execution of gender-based state violence is also evident in the strip-searching of female political prisoners, instituted as a regular practice in 1982 (Gillespie 1994: 2). Strip searches were used to target republican women in particular, including those on detention awaiting a court hearing. Women endured strip searches more often than their male counterparts and the searches were often accompanied by the threat of sexual violence or the use of sexually violent language (Pickering 2002). Many who experienced these invasive procedures compared them to rape (POWs in Maghaberry Prison 1986; Aretxaga 1997: 24; Aretxaga 2001: 9). Searches were justified as a security measure despite the fact that little contraband was ever unearthed. Both the National Council of Civil Liberties and Amnesty International conducted inquiries into the practice and condemned it as an exercise 'with the deliberate intention of degrading and humiliating women' (as cited in O'Rourke 2013: 76).

Republican women were attuned to the gendered nature of this violence as is shown in former republican prisoner and current Sinn Féin MEP Martina Anderson's statement on her experience: 'The British government is using women's nakedness to tyrannise them. We feel that our bodies are used like a weapon to penalise us with the intention of making us collapse under the pressure' (McAuley 1989: 75). The ability to use a gender lens to examine their experiences of state violence helped to foster a deeper, feminist political awareness. Republican activist Lily Fitzsimmons suggests that 'The British presence unified women in a determination where we organized ourselves against the military repression of the British army. It also made us realize our strength as a group' (Gillespie 1994: 12).

Prison Struggles and Acts of Solidarity

Another factor that contributed to the growth of feminism amongst republican women is the experience of prison struggles either as a prisoner or campaigner on the issue of women's prison conditions. Though related to strip searches and gender-based state violence during detention, time spent in prison is distinctly significant in that it was a fortuitous educational experience. Political incarceration created a space for discussion, learning, and reading about other struggles for social justice. Though Armagh prison did not have formal classes like those offered to men in Long Kesh (McKeown 1999: 9; Interview No. 13) women engaged in self and collective education by means of shared reading and discussions through prison walls. Many of these readings included histories of struggles for equality.

One former Armagh prisoner states, 'Throughout my life I have always identified with women's rights and equality but throughout jail my whole outlook was broadened [...] The whole range of how I would think and speak is a feminist outlook' (Interview No. 12). Similarly, Mairéad Farrell said of her time in prison: 'Well, we were educating ourselves in there and through events we became more aware of ourselves as women. So the movement developed and has developed over the years as regards to women prisoners and we developed ourselves in there. It was educational for both I think' (Derry Film and Video Collective 1988).

Familiarity with social movement struggles across the globe was commonplace amongst republican activists. Long-standing connections had been made with other movements, including Palestinian solidarity organizing, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and the US Civil Rights Movement. Feminist icons, such as Andrea Dworkin, spoke on the Falls Road, the heart of republican West Belfast while Bernadette Devlin popularized the politics of former Black Panther Angela Davis when she visited her in prison (Interview No. 17). Some feminists outside the North sought to lend their solidarity to the women in prison and many feminists from Britain, Europe, and as far away as the United States and New Zealand joined the pickets organized by republican feminists outside the gates of Armagh prison (D'Arcy 1981; Interview No. 6). These acts of solidarity had a profound effect on the republican women as they resulted in knowledge exchanges and the sharing of feminist ideas. One woman who helped organize the pickets explains:

> It was a whole learning process [...] A lot of the women who came over to help were lesbians and it was free and open [...] They were talking about different things and we realised that we were so ignorant and we decided we should read about women's bodies, so I read *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. I was reading it and thought, 'I didn't have a clue'. Once you broke out of your shell you wanted to know everything. (Interview No. 5)

Thus, for those women who spent time in prison or organized on the condition of women prisoners, their experiences helped foster an appreciation and commitment to feminism issues.

Marginalization

Finally, republican feminism was fostered through the experiences of marginalization and disempowerment many women felt inside both the

republican movement and the broader Northern Irish women's movement. Studies concerning other cases of feminist organizing highlight the importance of boundary work or oppositional identification to the framing of particular feminist collective identities (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Roth 2008; Rupp and Taylor 1999). Kimberly Springer (2005) details the significance of oppositional conflict in collective identity formation to Black feminist struggle. Relating to both Black men active in the struggle for Black liberation and white women in the women's liberation movement was an integral part of the process of politicization and group definition for Black feminism. This relational process resonates with the development of republican feminism in that oppositional conflict within and across both the nationalist and women's movement was also part of the process of republican feminist collectivization.

Gender divisions were clearly evident within the IRA, for instance, as women initially had to fight to be admitted in to the organization. Prior to the early 1970s, women were relegated to auxiliary roles as part of Cumann na mBan. This changed when women demanded military training from a new IRA leadership (Interview No. 11; Interview No. 13).

According to a number of the women I interviewed, men did have difficulty when women joined the army initially, while others insisted they had to engage in a more sustained struggle for equality. 'They had to fight for it', one former volunteer explains. 'A lot of the women that were involved had to fight for their position and certainly Marian Coyle and Rita O'Hare even had to fight to be a volunteer, you know, because we were just supposed to be making the tea or whatever' (Interview No. 21A).

Once within the IRA women took on key roles like bomb-making and training but their work in combat was not reflected in the organizational structure of the Army. One former female IRA volunteer states:

> They still only have second-class status. They would not be in top-ranking positions and that is all across the board, North and South [...] Over the past 30 years you might find five [women at a high level within the leadership of the IRA] [...] Men make all the important decisions. Generally speaking, the Army Council is men and maybe a token woman [...] Men are there because they are men; women have to earn their place because they're women. (Interview No. 7)

This gendered divide is made clearer when looking at the peace process and the limited role afforded to women over the course of the negotiations. Republican women were angry at their exclusion and publicly called on the

leadership to rectify their marginalization (Falls Women's Centre 1995; Clár na mBan 1994: 15).

The exclusion of women from these formal structures is not the only indication of the unequal status of women relative to men within the movement. Women's participation in the republican armed struggle is not given the same prominence as that of their male comrades. Hero worship in the form of ballads, poems, murals, and memorabilia are overwhelmingly dedicated to male volunteers (O'Keefe, 2013; McDowell, 2008; Dowler 1998). So explicit is this 'exorcism', as Martina Anderson termed it (Anderson 2001), that women organized their own collective memory work to ensure their place within the movement's history is documented (see, for example, Brady et al. 2011; Falls Women's Centre 1995).

Republican feminism as a collective identity was also shaped and consolidated by the marginalization of republican women from the broader women's movement in the North. Republican women were blamed for the tensions and subsequent under-development of the movement. Monica McWilliams of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, and the Downtown Women's Centre writes: 'Regardless of the differences between some of the groups, the dominant voice within the women's movement in Northern Ireland has been that of the various shades of nationalism. Giving top priority to the nationalist question served to silence the voices of Protestant women' (McWilliams 1995: 27; McWilliams 1991: 94).

Many within the movement emphasized the importance of bridge-building and felt it necessary to focus on universality rather than difference. A 'check your label at the door' policy was adopted for a number of meetings, and, most notably, as general policy for the largest group – the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement. This 'lowest common denominator politics' (O'Keefe 2013) meant that women attending meetings were not allowed to raise issues that were not shared by all women. It silenced those who wished to talk about experiences of oppression as, for example, gay women, working-class women, or republican woman.

This lowest common denominator politics meant that republican women were not allowed, for instance, to discuss the most pressing issues in their lives, namely, the violence of the state. Claire Hackett, a self-described republican feminist and queer activist, says:

> There were no concerted efforts on behalf of the women's movement to address [state violence against women]. It came from women organising within the republican communities [...] The daily state harassment wasn't articulated as a gender issue but a republican issue [...] They didn't deal

> with it because they would have had to take up a position themselves on the state and that was too scary. (Interview No. 14)

This policy, therefore, ignored the daily material realities of most women living in the North (Roulston 1997). It obscured the conflict and its affects on women, particularly women in working-class areas.

The campaign for the rights and dignity of female republican prisoners was particularly contentious for the women's movement. As strip searches were implemented, republican women pleaded with the broader women's movement for support (Loughran 1985; McCafferty 1980). Rather than condemning gendered state violence, many groups gave these women the cold shoulder, leaving them to organize on their own or with the support of women outside of the North.

More contemporary women's organizations (such as the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition) continued to anchor their politics on the assumption that overcoming 'tribalism' and encouraging communities to get along would resolve the political and structural issues in the North. Like their predecessors, the Coalition refused to take a position on state violence and argued 'politics is about getting on with people [...] [and] moving beyond the often destructive divisions of the past' (Northern Ireland Women's Coalition 2001:1).

This marginalization shaped republican feminism insofar as it encouraged a reflexive approach to dialogues around difference (Cockburn 1998). It also created a space for republican women to organize with other women isolated by lowest common denominator politics (Interview No. 2). For example, lesbian feminists were also silenced by this approach as issues pertaining to sexual orientation were deemed divisive and 'putting off ordinary women' (Interview No. 17; Interview No. 14). A strong relationship between republican and lesbian feminist communities developed as a result of their shared marginalization. Some within the lesbian community even chose to put their faith in republicanism to struggle for LGBTQ equality (Hackett 2001; Interview No. 17; Interview No. 9; Interview No. 14). The collaboration and solidarity that developed helped shape republican feminism insofar as it made it more inclusive and meant LGBTQ issues were incorporated into republican feminist politics.

Republican Feminism in Practice

Republican feminism sought to link patriarchal violence of the state to that which occurred in the bedroom. Republican feminists were active in

naming and resisting state violence and also in challenging violence against women in the community. They positioned their work at the intersection of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Examples of what constitutes republican feminism in practice are best found in Women Against Imperialism, the Falls Women's Centre, Sinn Féin Women's Department, and Clár na mBan, all of which made tangible challenges to gender inequality in the North.

Women Against Imperialism (WAI) formed in 1978 the wake of a series of splits in the broader women's movement in the six counties. It was made up of working-class women from republican communities in Belfast and Derry who wished to organize against the violence of the British state and to simultaneously challenge inequality on a number of fronts. According to founding member Una Ní Mhearain, WAI 'took the view that imperialism had distorted all the landscapes within Ireland, all the personal landscapes and political landscapes' (Interview No. 9). WAI is best known for leading the pickets outside the gates of Armagh prison during the no-wash strike. This small group of women gave talks in pubs and clubs on the topic of domestic violence in republican households for which they received a lot of criticism and outrage (Interview No. 9). Una Ní Mhearain suggests these talks had an effect on women in the community: 'An awful lot of women actually made the links as well when we were doing those talks. And it allowed, I think, it allowed women to come together and start to mention those things and start to mention violence, "yeah it does exist in this community"' (Northern Visions Television 2009). WAI members were also critical to bringing an end to the IRA practice of tarring and feathering. Women were tied to a lamp post in plain view and literally tarred and feathered as punishment for 'fraternizing' with British soldiers (Interview No. 9). These women also mobilized around debt, poverty, and living conditions (Interview No. 9). The group lasted until 1981, but many of its members continued to be active across a range of campaigns and organizations.

After WAI disbanded some members, including Una Ní Mhearain, founded the Falls Women's Centre. The centre became a vital support and resource for women in republican West Belfast. It opened its doors in 1981 and sought to provide a safe space for women in the community to be able to discuss and organize around all issues, including abortion, domestic violence, and poverty. The leaflets advertising the centre asked, 'Do you need help, support, advice with marital problems, D.H.S.S., assault, rape, incest or housing queries?' (Northern Visions Television 2009). The centre's volunteers (and, later on, paid staff) accompanied women to the courts,

to see solicitors when their marriage was breaking down, or to banks and debt collectors, if in financial crisis. They also escorted many frightened women to Women's Aid and removed them and their children from danger if they were being abused. In addition to being a women-only drop-in centre that served as a space for women to meet and chat, it provided classes on subjects ranging from computer training to confidence-building. With an on-site crèche, this made education a reality for many women (Interview No. 9).

The Falls Road was a community not served by the police, so for many women the centre was the only line of defence between them and the husbands who were battering them. Like other women's centres that subsequently popped up in West Belfast, the Falls Women's Centre offered much-needed services and support to working-class women who did not have access to traditional supports. Advice was offered on taboo subjects like pregnancy and childbirth as well as abortion and contraception, significant as abortion was illegal and access to contraception was limited (Interview No. 9). The establishment of the centre was a major achievement for republican feminism as it improved the material realities of many women and helped forge feminist connections between them.

Sinn Féin Women's Department is another example of republican feminism in practice. Operational in 1980, its purpose was to ensure women had a political voice within the party and in its 'ballot box' politics. It sought to affect party policy and introduce women-friendly structures in addition to raising key concerns for women. This was done using more formal party mechanisms as well as through regular publications such as *Women in Struggle*, a series of manifestos and policy documents. Its first comprehensive policy document was introduced and adopted by Sinn Féin at its 1980 Ard Fheis. The department highlighted issues of importance not just in relation to the republican struggle, like strip searches or the conditions of women prisoners. It also broke the silence on issues like abortion, contraception access, childcare, divorce, and domestic violence. The department is also responsible for Sinn Féin's quota system, which ensures 25 per cent of positions on its Ard Comhairle (Executive Committee) are reserved for women. The department also had the party commit to placing female candidates in winnable seats during elections (Interview No. 2; Ward 2000: 7; Rooney 1995: 52).

Due to pressure from the Women's Department, Sinn Féin introduced an educational process for its members on domestic violence (A Woman's Voice 1988; De Rossa 1998). Childcare subsidies were also introduced for

Sinn Féin's female employees (Lyons 1992: 267). Una Ní Mhearain of the Falls Women's Centre explains: 'Women have fought very long and hard to have those policies brought in and to shape policy' (Interview No. 9). Despite these achievements, the Women's Department failed to secure a pro-choice position from the party, much to the disappointment and anger of many republican women. Though the Women's Department no longer exists, the issue of reproductive choice continues to be a thorn in the side of the party as republican feminists place pressure on the party from the inside to adopt a feminist, pro-choice stance (Lane 1998).

Clár na mBan is another important example of republican feminist mobilization. Based on a series of informal conversations about the future of women in Irish nationalism, Clár na mBan officially formed in 1994 in the wake of the ongoing Hume-Adams talks. The group consisted of many established republican feminists like Claire Hackett and Una Ní Mhearain and sought to bring republican women together to discuss what a new Northern Irish society might look like. Clár na mBan was committed to ensuring that the voices of working-class women were heard when it came to shaping the future and in that vein organized a Belfast conference in March 1994 entitled 'Clár na mBan' (Irish for 'Women's Agenda for Peace'). The conference heard from many prominent republican feminists, such as Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, who denounced the ongoing peace talks: 'I reject the Hume-Adams agreement for the very simple reason, I haven't seen it' (Clár na mBan 1994: 15). There was a shared concern that the new society promised through the peace process would mean business as usual for women: '[W]hen the [British] government are talking about guaranteeing an end to violence, they are talking about the IRA handing over the weapons [...] they are not talking about making it a criminal offence for a man to beat his wife' (Clár na mBan 1994: 15). The agenda put forward as a result of the conference called for a 'demilitarised society, economic equality, rights for children, and an end to discrimination against disabled people and lesbians' (Clár na mBan 1994: 15). These proposals were submitted to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and also helped to shape the equality measures introduced in the Good Friday Agreement (Rooney 2000: 172; Interview No. 14).

These four examples expose the reach of republican feminism across both grass-roots and institutional levels. They also provide a snapshot of the shape republican feminism has taken as the Troubles progressed over time and as different issues came into focus. While the richness of this approach is evident throughout the conflict, the same cannot be said as the movement transitioned away from armed struggle.

Republican Feminism after the Good Friday Agreement

In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement republican feminism bears little resemblance to its early manifestations. This, in part, can be blamed on the institutionalization of republicanism as Sinn Féin strives for all-Ireland electoral success. The Women's Department was replaced by an Equality Department and manifestos dedicated solely to gender concerns are no longer issued. Feminists are still active within the party though are much less visible as a collective entity now.

Republican feminists are still active at the community level though in a manner that is more dispersed and less obvious. With funding for many community groups coming from EU Peace and Reconciliation Funds, many are forced to emphasize peace-building initiatives rather than decidedly feminist projects (Women's Support Network 2004: 7; O'Dowd et al. 2006). The Falls Women's Centre still exists, however, even though its founding members have moved on to other things. It offers much the same services as when it first opened the doors and these are greatly expanded and professionalized. It remains a feminist stalwart in republican West Belfast, drawing in younger generations to avail of its educational and social offerings.

While the heyday of republican feminism may have passed its significance it should not be discounted, as the lives of many women improved as a result of the collective organizing done in its name. It is, therefore, important that it is included in any documentation of the history of struggles for equality and social justice in the North. More broadly, there are lessons to be learned from republican feminism. Its development tells a story of how feminism can grow in extraordinary circumstances, how it can be made meaningful, how it is contradictory, and how it can affect change even in the face of treacherous conditions. Social movement scholars can draw on this case as an example of the significance of relational processes leading to collectivization and collective identity formation. Feminist activists and academics too, can use it to understand the complexities of organizing in divided societies. It serves as a reminder for feminists to be cognizant of the pitfalls of failing to adopt an intersectional approach to building inclusive feminist politics. The republican feminist case also serves as a useful critique of universal sisterhood insofar as it shows why the construction of difference is as important as notions of universality when organising as feminists. Finally, the story of republican feminism reminds us of the importance of reflexive feminism grounded in the everyday lives of women, of ensuring feminism is relevant and reflective of 'where we live, in our present' (hooks 2000: 117).

Interviews

No. 2, 12 September 2000
No. 5, 16 October 2000
No. 6, 17 October 2000
No. 7, 18 October 2000
No. 9, with Una Ní Mhearain, 23 October 2000
No. 11, 30 October 2000
No. 12, 1 November 2000
No. 13, 1 November 2000
No. 14, with Claire Hackett, 7 November 2000
No. 17, with Maggie Feeley, 30 August 2005
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