

Breaking Gender Roles and Gaining Agency

A Case Study on Women Actors in Northern Ireland

Abstract

The thesis will present and analyze different roles women actors in Northern Ireland took upon themselves during the period known as "The Troubles" (1969-1998). It will present a theoretical framework that consists of several relevant theories on agency, actorship and gender in conflict as well as created categories that helps organize the roles identified.

The type of conflict, in this case ethno-national conflict, is relevant to what identities become relevant, and in this case, gender roles in society reverts to traditional gender stereotypes. At the same time, the type of conflict assisted in letting women participate in traditional male roles, such as combatants. It was contradictive, and because women actors can not be considered as a unified entity, just like many other groups of people, some women directly challenged those traditional roles while other complied with them or used them for their own advantage.

Key Words: Agency, Actorship, Gender, Northern Ireland, Conflict

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1 Introduction

In conflict studies there is currently a lot of research in progress that deals with women in conflict; women as victims of domestic violence, victims of sexual violence, victims in forms of refugees, or as actors for peace building and conflict management.

This is a good thing. All of the points mentioned above are serious problems that need to be researched and dealt with.

On the other hand, this may also prove to be a problem when the majority of research conducted views women as either victims in conflict, or actors for peace. Women are not seen as possible proponents of violence and actors of political violence and the continuation of the conflict in question. This is a problem, and increases the risk of essentialization of women in the academic subject of conflict studies. By not counting women as potential actors for violence, women are not seen as equal actors to other groups and the partial actorship contributes to further weaken agency for women in conflict and post-conflict.

Women as actors of political violence are often overlooked. Therefore, this thesis will be based on the following query:

Under what forms did female actors contribute to the political violence and the continuation of the conflict in Northern Ireland during the period that is to be called “The Troubles”?

Violence and conflict are traditionally seen as areas reigned by masculinity. Not men in general, but the social construction that is gender roles. Masculine features are favourably regarded whilst feminine features are looked down upon. In conflict, it is seen as masculine to directly participate in the violence and fight for a cause. It is expected of mostly men to engage in the conflict. Women, and that what is defined as feminine, are expected to play the roles of passive victims; they are not to participate directly, but support from the side lines and keep the identity of the group “untainted”.

The ambition of this thesis is to argue that whilst traditional gender perspectives considers women as generally more peaceful, I disagree and argue that women actors for political violence exists in conflicts as well, but not in the traditional sense. I will explore what roles these actors take upon themselves in an ethno-national conflict, where traditional values are strong and the conflict is mostly between two non-state actors; the loyalists/unionists that identifies themselves as Protestants, and the catholic republicans/nationalists.

1.1 Disposition

The question this thesis will answer will be expanded in the following chapters. Chapter 2 will introduce the different theories that will be present during the thesis, and the theoretical framework and its components will be introduced and explained in further detail. The theory around the type of conflict, in this case ethno-national conflict, will be presented, as well as the concept of *spoilers*.

The notion of agency is central to the whole thesis, so it will be discussed as a theory and later in the analysis it will be used to assess the roles and the impact they made on women's agency on Northern Irish society.

Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry presented in their book *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*¹ three narratives by which violent women were viewed and judged by. The narratives will be included and further explained in the theory in order to be used in the analysis of the different categories when discussing how the actors were regarded.

In the next chapter, *Method*, it will be explained how the question will be answered. The method of *explanatory case study* is presented as well as the reasoning behind choosing the case.

Later in the chapter, the topic of material and exactly how the problem is to be examined is brought up.

¹ Sjoberg, Laura; Gentry, Caron E. 2007, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores; Women's violence in global politics*

The chapter *Background* presents the empirical information necessary to understand the situation and the circumstances around the conflict in Northern Ireland and the problem presented in the thesis. It will explain the time period the thesis is grounded in, namely *The Troubles* from 1969 to 1998, the two sides of the conflict including the goals and women's position and agency within them.

The most important chapter, *Analysis*, will use the theories and the methodology presented earlier, and answers the question asked earlier in the introduction. With the help of the gathered material, each category will be further analyzed and filled with the roles identified.

Note that I do not wish to generalize any group mentioned in this thesis. From what I have learned and read, that is the gravest mistake you can commit regarding topics like this one. Neither do I wish to vilify or put blame on any group or individual. This text is not out to paint women in general in a bad light, or argue that women is the cause of conflict and the creators of terrorists.

If any argument appears to be that way, I apologize, and note that it was not my purpose to do so.

The intention is to highlight the fact that women in conflicts are not only limited to the roles of victims and peace builders, but many are also actors for the political violence that fuels the conflict.

2 Theory

2.1 Theoretical framework

In order to fully explain and analyze the current topic of this thesis, I have chosen to create and assemble a theoretical framework that includes several theories that will, when combined adequately cover the topic.

This theoretical framework will be used to categorize and analyze the empirical material. It will consist of several categories, and be backed by already determined and widely used theories and concepts, although I will apply a gender-based perspective on them, in order to make the theories more relevant to the topic at hand. The theories that will be prominent in the framework will include *ethno-national conflict*, *spoilers*, the notion of *agency* in conflict and several narratives that have been used to explain women's violent actions within traditional gender roles.

The categories that will be used and further developed later in the thesis will be as follows;

- Leaders
- Support/Upkeep
- Combatants
- Family members

I believe that these categories will be sufficient in covering the topic of agency. Each of these categories will be explained below. They are primarily made to make it easier for both the author and the reader to analyze and get an overall perspective of the relevant roles. These categories were chosen because even though it is not possible to generalize using singular case studies, it should be possible to use this framework on other conflicts to further expand upon the research. These categories are general in terms of their nature and can be found in every conflict.

What roles are included and how they are expressed in the local context is of course different, and that is the point.

Since it is not possible for me to directly interview former actors or produce other first-hand empirical material, this is the best way to gather the material necessary to be able to write a relevant analysis.

2.1.1 Leaders

This category will be comprised of the agency of communal, political, religious and leaders from different parts of society. Leaders that have influence on the people around them and that have power to directly influence the conflict is included here.

The unfortunate reality is that there weren't all that many leaders, official as unofficial, that were women. Therefore, the category will mostly be discussing why that was, and what was stopping women from taking the leadership roles. This is directly connected to the other categories as well as the other theories, with the type of conflict that influences the gender climate and the narratives explains why women were not taken as seriously in the violent context.

2.1.2 Support/Upkeep

There are numerous accounts of women as transporters or smugglers of weapons and other contraband across borders, between hideouts and to and from areas of operation. They are as close you can get to being directly involved in the political violence without actually being a combatant.

This category will include actors that act like smugglers, hosts for hideouts, supply points, transportation, cover-ups etc. They directly aid the combatants, and have a stake in the conflict, but did not themselves plant bombs or firing weapons. They can arguably be considered as combatants, because these roles can be found in a regular army as well, with all of the maintenance troops such as engineers, drivers etc. These roles are a separate category because the gender division is different from legit combatants.

I argue that in this scenario, women are more represented in these roles because of their gender. It is the modern version of camp followers and trackers.

Military medical personnel have always consisted of large portions of female nurses and other staff.

2.1.3 Combatants

Despite what the traditional gender roles say, there will almost always be a number of women actors that take up arms and break the stereotype. This category will include the women that took an active part in the fighting, that shot at people and planted bombs.

Later in the thesis, I will describe how they were regarded by both their fellow combatants, but also by the general public, and the difference between the nationalist and unionist female fighters. The perception on why women take up arms and the reality behind it is discussed and again referred to the narratives explained below.

2.1.4 Family members

The institution of family plays a big part in perpetrating certain ideas and values that contributes to why individuals choose to involve themselves in conflict. More so in ethno-national conflict when a specific identity is being glorified. In traditional societies with strong gender roles, mothers are expected to raise the children, and teach them values that are shared with the local context and society in general.

In conflicts that has been going on as long as the one in Northern Ireland, there are bound to be myths, stories and songs about old injustices, war heroes and other individuals that symbolizes the own group.

This category will cover the impact that female family members and mothers in particular have on the conflict, the immediate society and the individuals that becomes combatants.

2.2 Ethno-national conflict

The conflict in Northern Ireland is a form of *ethno-national conflict*. The theory associated with that type of conflict is relevant to this thesis in the form of justification for the choice of this particular conflict as a case. It is also a part of the theoretical framework and the theory around the type of conflict contributes to explaining the circumstances in the case.

Nadim Rouhana and Daniel Bar-tal claims that the conflict in Northern Ireland is irresolvable, and dubs it as an “*intractable ethno-national conflict*”². Although I agree that this is indeed an ethno-national conflict, it is unfortunate that the article was not written a few years later, when the peace agreement was agreed upon and ratified. Even though the conflict in Northern Ireland has been proven by history to be tractable and solvable, the definition that the previously mentioned authors presents fits well within the conflict, because at the time of writing the article, the conflict seemed to be intractable. Most of the arguments they present fits with the Northern Ireland conflict, although the conclusion and the naming has proven to be irrelevant. The outcome of the Northern Ireland conflict may be proof of there still being hope for the other “intractable” conflicts the article presented, and by researching different instances of this case, it may contribute to understand the other, still unsolved conflicts.

They define an intractable ethno-national conflict through several points as a conflict that involves large parts of the society and is always a relevant and central topic in everyone’s minds, including leaders and other societal institutions. The conflict is relevant and highly topical to everyone and their decisions³. They further explain some of the coping mechanisms used by the group to deal with the long conflict in order to keep the common identity consolidated⁴. One of them is the belief that their cause is the one and only; the other group they are fighting is wrong in every form. The own group are the victims, and has a just reason to fight.

² Rouihana, Nadim R. ; Bar-Tal, Daniel, 1998, *Psychological Dynamics of Intractable Ethnonational Conflict*

³ Rouhana; Bar-Tal, 1998, s. 761-762

⁴ Rouhana; Bar-Tal, 1998, s. 765-766

The nationalist group feels like they have been continually harassed and discriminated against by the local government and the unionists. The unionists feel like it is their duty to keep the United Kingdom whole and fight the separatists in the other camp.

The type of conflict is relevant to the thesis because the type of conflict determines the hierarchy of identities. The type of conflict can prove to lessen or strengthen traditional gender roles. Ethno-nationalist conflicts contributes to a higher degree of a sort of militarization of the community, which in this case, both strengthen and weakens gender roles for women at the same time. This will be further explained later in this thesis.

Ethno-national conflicts may not be the only type of conflict to mobilize large parts of society to support the conflict. Militarization of society is anticipated in many other types of conflicts, where the result is increased budgets for defence and army and aggressive nationalistic rhetoric becomes commonplace to rally the population around the cause and increase support and legitimacy for the conflict at hand. Military structures are most certainly masculine in nature, and when they grow in importance and start to take more room in society, masculine values spreads and traditional gender roles are enhanced. Women are expected to stand behind and support their husband soldiers. Society may become more traditional and conservative, and while the combatants are being celebrated for their masculinity, women are expected to uphold the feminine values in society and unconditionally, while passive, support their husbands and family members.

2.3 Mothers, Monsters, Whores

Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry's book "*Mothers, Monsters, Whores*" describes in a well-rounded fashion how women's violence is explained in conservative and traditional context (i.e. in the same context that defines women as peaceful and passive). All three narratives that are brought up in the book serves us well when applying them on the categories listed above. They can be used when explaining the restrictions of actorship and what roles they could take. They also explain the reactions women faced when breaking the mould and became non-traditional actors, for the most part when taking a role that included violence. The narratives describe the identities that were central to the essentialization of women in traditional gender roles that is the source of the problem.

This book has been used by many other researchers whose articles are relevant and are being used as material in this thesis. This suggests that the narratives are accepted and affirmed within academic research.

The three narratives presented in the book will be used as reference in the way violence by women are being presented and viewed by traditional viewpoints. The narratives will be most relevant in the category of combatants, because of the way that the two authors have chosen to focus on "violent women". Of course, they will not be limited to a single category, and will be present during a general analysis of women in conflict that will be explained after the presentation and analysis of each of the categories. All three narratives will be described and explained below.

These narratives are identified from the behaviour that effectively removes agency from women. It punishes women that breaks the norm and actively takes part in conflict and other traditionally masculine areas of operation⁵ by branding them as somehow broken, insane or incomplete as individuals.

2.3.1 Mothers

Female fighters were often linked to their roles as mothers, because it is in general exclusive to women. The identity of motherhood contains more than just the notion of being a female parent to a child; it refers to the abstract notion of the biological ability to give birth and everything that is linked to it. Provider, nurturer, bringer of life are all included in the motherhood narrative. It seems unnatural that a person that brings new life to the world would be capable to end life by choice. There must therefore be some kind of disruption with the biological identity and the individual. Sjoberg and Gentry gave several examples of this with ways that media presents female fighters in several conflicts. The women were labelled widows that were avenging a dead husband etc. ⁶ The fact that they pretended to be pregnant and smuggled bombs in baby carriages were given much focus in media⁷.

2.3.2 Monsters

Because of the scarcity of women fighters, the ones that take part in violent conflict may be the subject of the next narrative; violent women as monsters.

Because of this image as monsters, potentially violent women are regarded as extra violent and vicious⁸. Female terrorist groups quickly gain infamy, whether it's well deserved or not, as more ferocious as their male counterparts. It may be true, that the women actors are trying to overcompensate or fully embrace certain ideals to a further extent in order to prove them/herself to the rest of the group. Sjoberg and Gentry uses the Medusa story as example of this narrative⁹; women that wield violence are in nature terrible, and must be dealt with without discrepancies. The reason behind the narrative may be wounded masculine pride or insecurity, that the women that are equally capable of killing are somehow more violent and probably insane, because it goes against their nature.

⁵ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 50

⁶ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 30-36

⁷ McEvoy, Sandy, 2004, *Violent women, Political Actors: A Feminist analysis of Female Terror*, s. 8

⁸ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 37

⁹ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 38

It may also be created to scare other women into staying away from violent actions. To be prepared to kill or commit violent actions must be a sign that a woman is some sort of sub-human monster that goes against everything that being a woman stands for¹⁰.

2.3.3 Whores

Women that embraced masculine ideals and acted less than feminine were labelled as lesbians, sexually incapable or sexually insatiable.

Women in general are judged by the ability and desire to please men, and if a woman commits a violent action, it is explained within that narrative.

Women that enlisted in armies or were members in paramilitary groups were thought of as either camp followers instead of actual soldiers, or as only wanting to find a husband, or otherwise have relations with the soldiers¹¹. It was deemed morally wrong that women spent so much time with so many men around them, and they were blamed for distracting the soldiers with their “wicked womanly charms” and sexuality, when they were in fact just going about their duties. Sexual violence within a military structure amongst female and male soldiers was blamed on the female presence alone, and the repercussions were often close to nil. Women’s sexuality were often ignored, disregarded or distorted to fit traditional notions of women being inferior to men.

¹⁰ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 40-41

¹¹ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 44-45

2.4 Spoilers

A concept that will be used in a more general way in the theoretical framework, is applicable to almost all of the categories mentioned above, is the concept of *Spoilers*.

The concept is generally considered as a label on various parties that during or after a conflict, sees peace as a threat to their own agendas, and actively tries to sabotage any peace processes or peace agreements. In this scenario, the spoilers mentioned in this text are deemed as such because of their involvement in the conflict. It can be argued that any individual that takes part in the conflict and doesn't work for a ceasing of violence and a lasting peace can be stamped as spoilers.

Mari Fitzduff tells a story of her own experience when the general public had normalized the violence as an often occurring part of their every-day life. She writes that one of her relatives kept a garden, and when a couple of paramilitaries fled from a bomb-planting mission, they went through her garden¹². Instead of reacting to the fact that the men were armed and masked, she scolded them for jumping over her fence, when there was gate right next to them.

This story is relevant, because it shows that when people accept the violence and conflict in their lives, it puts less pressure on leaders to actually solve the conflict, and it legitimizes the paramilitary groups. If no one objects to their acts of violence, they must be okay with it. Of course, not everyone in Northern Ireland accepted the violence and was strongly against all forms of political violence, and displayed it in public. Also, by accepting the conflict around them, they accept the values that go with it, including traditional gender roles.

Though the concept can be divided in two categories; passive and aggressive spoilers. Aggressive spoilers can be classified as the ones that actively try to further the conflict and prevent peace by supporting and using political violence, while a passive spoiler is like the woman in the story above, individuals that does not use political violence, but does nothing to prevent it and accepts the violence and conflict in their everyday lives.

¹² Fitzduff, Mari, 2010, *Women and War in Northern Ireland*

The focus will naturally be on aggressive spoilers; otherwise the concept will be far too wide and not as relevant for this thesis.

The concept of spoilers may have been too stretched out and watered down in this case, and including more than the original purpose of the concept intended. The original notion of spoilers is actors during a peace process that actively tries to sabotage the peace because it is not beneficial to them¹³. The true spoilers in the traditional sense were for the most part IRA and Provisional IRA, paramilitary/terrorist groups fighting for the nationalist/republican side. Their refusal carry out certain terms of the peace treaties led to the breakdown and further conflict. But the loyalist paramilitary groups and their supporters also showed discontent towards the treaties, and could possible evolve to full-on spoilers.

The intent of including the concept *spoilers* is to use it as some sort of overarching, general theory when discussing the different actors and categories for the theoretical framework and provide a basis for the selection of categories and roles discussed. Why and how the actors mentioned do contribute to the conflict, and, with a gender perspective, why are they relevant to this thesis.

2.5 Agency

This theory will be the basis for the framework and will explain what it means to be an actor and having agency and why it is relevant to this thesis.

The categories (combatants, support, family etc.) are all based on actors in conflict. The actors this thesis is researching are lacking in agency, and are therefore formed by other powers than themselves. They are limited to certain roles, which will be brought up later during the discussion of the categories, which will discuss how some actors tried to gain agency in different ways, and by different means, depending on the role they played.

With the passing of UNSCR 1325 and several other resolutions that mention the inclusion of women in post-conflict peacebuilding, prevention and resolution of conflict, women are on the route of becoming legitimate and full agents of se-

¹³ Stedman, John Stephen, 1997, *Spoiler problems in peace processes*, s. 7 ff.

curity¹⁴. But that role would be incomplete, if the only focus was on the peacebuilding part of conflict. For women to be considered as legitimate agents of security, they must be acknowledged as potential agents and actors of violence and conflict as well, just as men are.

Andrea Cornwall identified what the term *agent* and *agency* was; "...whereas actors are engaged in a consultative mode of participation, agents are better conceived of as transformative (2003: 1327) of both direct (immediate) and structural (removed) concerns."¹⁵ Gaining actorship does not necessarily mean having agency. Laura Shepherd further explains the notion of agency; "Central to the concept of agency is the idea of autonomy (literally 'self law'), the capacity to act independent of external constraints or coercion; independence itself as an ideal is imbricated with notions of appropriate gendered behaviours..."¹⁶

Gaining agency is more about being able to independently act on an equal basis and have enough power to be considered as an equal or at least a serious part in the grand scheme of things, instead of being used as a potential tool when it is time to end hostilities and begin with the peace process. The essentialist view of women as victims and/or peace builders are hurting their agency¹⁷. Their roles as actors does not happen on their terms, but instead it is based on a constructed view based on traditional gender roles; women are supposed to be passive and peaceful, whilst men are the aggressive and violent ones.

¹⁴ Shepherd, Laura J. 2011, *Sex, Security and Superhero(in)es; From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond*, s. 508

¹⁵ Shepherd, 2011, s. 512

¹⁶ Åhäll, Linda; Shepherd, Laura J. 2012, *Gender, agency and political violence*, s. 6

¹⁷ Mertus, Julie, 2010, *Shouting from the bottom the Well; The impact of international trials for wartime rape on women's agency*, s. 115

3 Methodology

As it may appear by the presentation of the thesis, the best way to study the subject is by the use of case studies.

The method that will be used has the character of a case study with a single case. Because it is a single case, it will naturally be studied in-depth, and whilst no new theory will be proposed, by applying gender perspective, it will expand upon already existing theories and explain as to why these roles are available to women actors and how the agency included in the conflict is gendered. The intention is to further develop relevant theories regarding the Northern Ireland conflict and the participation and agency of women in conflict.

It will expand on previous literature and research on the subject, such as *Women as Agents of political Violence: Gendering Security* by Miranda Alison¹⁸. Whilst she wrote about women combatants in ethno-national conflicts, more specifically in the IRA and the LTTE, I will expand this notion to include all women actors that contribute to conflict from all parties in conflict, and not only violent actors.

To identify the different kinds of actors, further literature will provide the necessary material.

As Teorell and Svensson wrote in their book¹⁹, the first step in choosing the case will be to identify, classify and categorize what roles women actors were given or took upon themselves. This will be done by the theoretical framework (see the *theory* section).

The reasoning behind the choice of Northern Ireland as a case, and the only case is because of its high relevance²⁰. The case is a prime example of an ethno-national conflict with all that it entails. The nature of what the different parties choose to identify themselves as (religious identities are important, but not crucial

¹⁸ Alison, Miranda, 2004, *Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security*

¹⁹ Teorell, Jan; Svensson, Torsten, 2012, *Att Fråga och att Svara*, s. 26

²⁰ Teorell, Svensson, 2012, s. 151

to the conflict) as well as the longevity of the conflict presents clear gender roles in the society which has gotten used to the violence. The gender aspect is also quite clear in the Northern Irish society. Traditional gender roles were strong and the agency for women was restricted.

The result presented in the end of this thesis will not be enough to be generalized. This is one of the shortcomings of using the method of singular case study. Though I have tried to formulate the theoretical framework so that the categories developed for the theoretical framework is not specific to the Northern Ireland conflict, and can easily be used in other conflicts as well. Instead, the thesis will further look at and contribute to further theorisation of the conflict and agency with gender perspectives.

The case study will be limited in time to primarily between the years 1969 to 1998, a time period that is also called *The Troubles*. This time period is probably the most well-known period in the Northern Ireland conflict. It was when the IRA was active and when there was a British military force present. The conflict can be traced back several hundred years, but that would prove to be too big of a time-frame to analyze, considering the circumstances of this thesis.

3.1 Material

Because of various obvious reasons, I am unable to produce the first-hand material like interviews or own observations that would be ideal for this study.

Instead, I will make use of academic articles and books written by other scholars. Some has made their own interviews, whilst some lived in Northern Ireland and experienced the violence first-hand.

It is important to acknowledge and be aware of source criticism when second-hand material is being used. The authors of those articles have their own problems they focused on, and found different things more relevant than what I may have chosen to highlight. The next best thing besides producing my own material is getting a hold of a transcribed interview without an analysis or a selection of information. This may be difficult to get a hold of, so primarily, the material used will be published material.

4 The Troubles

This chapter will briefly present and explain the context of the question at hand; the time period known as *The Troubles*, the different parties of the conflicts.

The section describing the two main parties will explain, besides their main motivations and their identity, what position women had in the respective societies.

Because of the complex and long history of the conflict, the short description of the conflict found below is simplified. In order to fully map the conflict and explain all of the motives and the origins of the identities, a whole new thesis would be required.

The Northern Ireland conflict was primarily over the constitutional status of the region that is called Northern Ireland. It was colonized by British settlers in the late 16th century and the area has been troubled ever since. The conflict between the Irish (catholic) minority and the British settlers (protestant) escalated in the 19th and 20th century, and in 1921, the two states of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State were formed. The political climate between the two newly formed states started out with a positive outlook; a peaceful and cooperative rhetoric could be heard from both north and south²¹. Although, as time went by, the political leaders started to identify their states with a religious identity, something that only provided fuel to the conflict. The state leaders wanted to build and strengthen an identity that would be different from their neighbour and build nationalist tendencies among the population. This way, the various religions in the area became symbols for the countries.

²¹ Walker, Brian, 2012, *A Political History of Two Irelands; From Partition to Peace*, s. 4

The major actors during the troubles have been around for a long time. Most of the paramilitary groups and political parties from both sides formed in the early 1900s²².

In 1969, the period known now as “the troubles” began, and brought with it a period of intense violence and further division amongst the population, despite attempts from some politicians.

A strong civil rights movement had started to gain power and momentum, and held several protest marches in the late 1960’s. The marches escalated into violence between loyalists and nationalists and riots in the areas where the protests were taking place²³. The paramilitary units from both sides gained from this and grew in numbers as well as in power. “Operation Banner” began in 1969, and British armed forces were stationed in Northern Ireland as per request by the local government. The primary task was to assist the local authorities in keeping the peace.

The violence and tensions between the paramilitaries and the army on the streets, and the different political parties in public forums would continue throughout the rest of the 20th century. Various attempts to agree on a peace treaty was made, and ultimately failed because of various reasons, mostly because the extremists in both camps did not want to compromise and settle for anything less than complete implementation of the respective goals; that Ulster would become either a separate state independent of both Ireland and United Kingdom or to merge with Ireland to unify the Island, or the ascertainment of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom and a protestant entity. It was not until the ceasefire in the early 1990s and later the Belfast Agreement that it looked like the situation could evolve and hopefully transform into a decent peace, or a least a scaling down of the conflict that had taken more than 3000 lives since the 70’s and wounded numerous others.

²² Walker, 2012, s. 6

4.1 Unionists

The population that was in favour of remaining as a part of United Kingdom did not support the unionist paramilitary groups in the same extent that the republican population supported IRA and PIRA²⁴. The unionist population had other, more legitimate actors and agents they relied on, like the British army and the police. The unionist political parties never supported the larger paramilitary groups, and frequently renounced their use of violence²⁵. Unlike the nationalist groups, the unionist forces fought a different kind of war. They did not fight for freedom or independence; they fought a counter-terrorist war against the IRA and the PIRA²⁶ with a much larger support from larger actors in the form of the British government and the military. The notion of ethno-national conflict is not as strong and clear with a unionist perspective.

According to interviews made by Sandra McEvoy²⁷, the multiple attempts on closing the gap between the groups and getting closer to a peaceful North Ireland were seen and treated as a threat to the loyalist groups, at least the ones that supported the paramilitaries. Their protestant identities were threatened when the possibility for Northern Ireland to actually become a part of the rest of Ireland, if the majority of the population voted yes. They felt betrayed by the political parties and the British government, since the paramilitary groups identified themselves as defenders of the union, and the United Kingdom at large, as well as the protestant community²⁸ and saw it like the government yielded to the violence caused by the IRA and the PIRA. Female members of the paramilitary and more extreme loyalist groups supported the protests against the agreements, and felt that the suffering of the protestant community by the IRA and the PIRA was swept under the rug and that they were painted as the perpetrators.

²³ Walker, 2012, s. 116-117

²⁴ Provisional IRA, a breakout organization from the original IRA

²⁵ Simpson, Kirk, 2009, *Unionist voices and the Politics of Remembering the Past in Northern Ireland*, s. 5

²⁶ Alison, 2004, s. 454

²⁷ McEvoy, Sandra, 2009, *Loyalist Women Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland: Beginning a Feminist Conversation about Conflict Resolution*, s. 273

²⁸ McEvoy, 2009, s. 269

The number of female members in the two largest loyalist groups was relatively small; around 2 percent were women in the UVF, the second largest group²⁹. The roles these women were assigned or took upon themselves were not so much direct combatants as support staff for the fighters that actually planted bombs and killed people. They were drivers, gatherers of intelligence, smugglers, robbers etc³⁰.

4.2 Nationalists

The nationalist side of the conflict fought a different kind of war than the previously mentioned loyalists/unionists. They fought for independence, or at least for secession from the United Kingdom. They have rather successfully created a narrative where they are seen as the victims, and as the righteous side, with events such as the notorious “Bloody Sunday”³¹ and the military intervention from the British government. The rather large and important exceptions from this narrative are the largest nationalist paramilitary groups; the IRA and the PIRA. The groups got a lot more attention than their loyalist counterparts, at least in international media, and were branded as terrorist groups. The nationalist paramilitary groups were responsible for the majority of the killings during the troubles³² and were the cause that prohibited many negotiations from advancing. The groups quickly became the face for the nationalist cause, which harmed the non-violent sections, namely the civil rights movements and the political party Sinn Fein (although the party has been accused to being too close³³ to the PIRA). Protests were derailed and turned into riots, unionist groups and the British soldiers were provoked when nationalist paramilitary presence was obvious in non-violent contexts etc.

Nationalistic women generally took a more active roll in the conflict than their loyalist counterparts. IRA and PIRA had special branches within their organizations for women that allowed them to be more directly involved³³, and later they

²⁹ McEvoy, 2009, s. 270

³⁰ McEvoy, 2009, s. 270

³¹ A demonstration that derailed and subsequently led to British troops opening fire and killing 13 people.

³² Walker, 2012, s. 131

³³ Alison, 2004, s. 451

would be allowed to become full members. At the same time, IRA claimed that they fought for equality and women's rights, ideals that goes hand in hand with liberatory movements³⁴. In order to gain legitimacy, such movements must claim to represent and have widespread and diverse support among the population the claim to fight for.

Because the share of women in the paramilitary groups, other members learned to accept and treat the participating women as fellow combatants, instead of someone not equal to themselves. Obviously, sexism was still present, and women were being given roles and tasks that directly benefited from them being female. Planting bombs and smuggling contraband in strollers and in cars with children in them, as well as assassinating British soldiers disguised as prostitutes³⁵ are just a few examples of tasks that utilised women because of their sex and the general perception of women.

³⁴ Alison, 2004, s. 452

³⁵ Alison, 2004, s. 457

5 Analysis

5.1 Ethno-nationalist conflict

As Miranda Allison brings up in her article, two types of revolution can occur³⁶; it can either promote equality and feministic ideals, or it can swing the other way and use women and traditional gender roles to promote traditional, sometimes religious ideals that can strengthen the communal sense of belonging and the common identity.

The same thing can be said for ethno-nationalist conflicts, because more often than not, the main actors in the conflict are non-state groups that fight for some sort of revolutionary or liberatory ideal. This is of course highly dependant on the case in question, and it is unfair to generalize in a too great of an extent.

In the case of Northern Ireland, one side fought for liberty, whilst the other side fought for unity and had the backing of a legitimate state. Because of this, the gender aspect in the conflict is more complex and both types are present and observable. The IRA claimed to be supportive of women's rights, but at the same time religion became very important and brought with it orthodox gender roles. Ireland in general has been very traditional and conservative in social values. It was not until recently that the government of Ireland proposed a bill that would allow abortions³⁷. The conflict opened up for women to take upon themselves roles that would not be available to them in peace time, but at the same time gender roles were reinforced. It was a contradictory result, and obviously different outcomes affected different people. On the whole, the Northern Irish society did not become more welcome towards women's agency after the conflict, partially because of the nature of the conflict.

³⁶ Alison, 2004, s. 452

5.2 Leaders

There were not a whole lot of political leaders in Northern Ireland that were women. It was only as late as in the 90's when the NIWC formed that there were clear female presence in the political arena that had women's rights on their agenda, and that party later played an important role in the peace negotiations as a middle ground between the republican party Sinn Fein and the loyalist parties.

The political representation in Northern Ireland was almost completely male. Every party leader was male and the gender and equality issue was rarely brought up, especially during the troubles. Not until the 1990's with the NIWC did things start to slightly change. But politics was mainly male dominated; the very few women that were in the parliament were either internalized so that they reacted with big hostility towards the gender issue, or were wives of other prominent members.

Women did organize themselves in groups and movements with the goal of shielding their local society and families from conflict. It resulted in protests against the military operations in the area³⁸ and harassment from the authorities.

Like in many other previous conflicts, women got involved in traditionally masculine sectors almost by accident. Previously in larger conflicts, a deficit in available manpower appeared as more men joined the army and died on the battlefield. This opened up the job market to women, and they gained more legitimacy as a product of that. In Northern Ireland, increased involvement by women was the result of internment without trial. As more leaders of various organizations and groups got imprisoned or killed, the opportunity for women to claim agency grew along with it.

The lack of female leaders, official as unofficial makes the problem obvious. There was no legitimate representation for active women during the troubles that could fight for the inclusion. Women that wanted to take that role was dismissed or not given the opportunity. The numerous NGOs that were active were not con-

³⁷ <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/01/world/europe/ireland-abortion> date of use: 2013-05-13

³⁸ Sharoni, Simona, 2001, *Rethinking Women's Struggles in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland*, s. 90

sidered as legitimate actors and were also dismissed. There was no room for any actors that focused on other issues than the conflict at hand; it was too pressing of a matter. This also ties in with the discourse within women groups during the time, whether they should put their gender lobbying on hold in order to support their side of the conflict better.

The conflict did not generate the female participation that some hoped for, and it seems like the traditional tendencies of ethno-national conflict prevailed and patriarchal values were enhanced with the presence of violence and discourses between different identities.

5.3 Combatants

As described in the earlier, more republican women either decided to be or were allowed to be combatants for the IRA and the Provisional IRA, and carry and use weapons and in general take a more active role in the conflict. From the republican side, the perspective looked a lot more like a traditional ethno-national conflict, and the local society were in large more involved than the loyalist counterpart. The republicans did not have a state actor that would back them up and give them legitimacy. The whole movement were coloured by the actions by the paramilitary organizations. The republic or Ireland was certainly not willing to go up against the British government and support a group that was to be labelled as terrorists. They had themselves a history of conflict between the government and republican extremists that resulted in a civil war in the 1920's.

Loyalist paramilitaries were fighting a different kind of war, and were not able to mobilize in the same extent as the republican groups. Although the largest loyalist group had thousands of members, civilians could choose to support other, more legitimate means to fight for their cause. Because those choices were state-based structures in form of the British army and the local police, other identities were prioritized and meant something else compared to the nationalists.

The female combatants are the most obvious actors in conflict. They became actors that were fundamentally designed to fit in with the traditional, masculine

idea of conflict, violence and security. They have either accepted the ideals that are currently relevant, and adapted some masculine ideals whilst rejecting other feminine ideals in order to more fit in with the traditional, patriarchal structure that is conflict. Or they decided to create their own agency and work to claim traditional masculine roles in conflict for themselves, and prove that the traditional roles and stereotypes are indeed false. A general idea is that these women that take up arms are some sort of deviants, and their respective reasons must be utterly personal; they may have been involved in some sort of trauma previously in their lives, like sexual assault or loss of a loved one as a part of the conflict. These women must be driven by revenge and hatred against their assailants. In contrast, men must therefore choose to fight for another reason, one that is not emotional or personal. Being emotional (and therefore, in some degree, irrational) is considered a feminine trait, whilst being logical, rational is masculine behaviour. But there are also some emotions that are masculine. Men can be passionate, and feel a strong sense of honour and loyalty towards the community and “the cause”. These are acceptable reasons to take up arms, because they are linked to masculinity. It is not obvious that women can also inherit these traits that are being accepted as reasons.

Because of the longevity of the conflict, it is inevitable that some women joined paramilitary groups because of personal trauma, just as men did. The violence affected all groups in society.

Miranda Alison writes that during her interview, she noticed that the paramilitary groups (at least within the IRA) seemed to get used to women within their ranks as time passed³⁹. In the end, some women involved managed to prove themselves as equal actors and equally able to be a part of the armed part of the struggle. Other saw the strategic value in incorporating women in the groups as they could gain access to places and situations that men could not.

³⁹ Alison, 2004, s. 456

5.4 Support/upkeep

The women that did not take an as active roll as the combatants did, but were all the same involved in the paramilitary organizations got to do other things than shoot people and plant bombs. Female drivers and smugglers were frequently used by both sides because they were not as suspicious looking as their male counter part when driving past a military roadblock.

These kinds of roles are in a grey-zone regarding breaking or conforming to traditional gender roles. The women involved were not violent, but supported the violence in an active way, as opposed to the passivity that was expected.

These actors used the narrative of motherhood to their advantage; when transporting weapons and such, one woman being interviewed remembered that she could have weapons hidden beneath the seat with her children sitting there in the truck, and the soldiers doing the searching of vehicles did not bother them⁴⁰.

These kinds of roles were more available to women because it was more out of harm's way instead of planting bombs. If the drivers and smugglers got caught, the sentence was lighter than murder or acts of terror. But internment was still something that a lot of women actors had to go through and the roles of support were not entirely without risk.

Some of the previous literature explains the absence of women in combat roles as masculine insecurity. If women were allowed in as soldiers and something as childish as a woman had a bigger gun than her male comrade, there would be a problem⁴¹. If a woman soldier were to be injured during an operation, the other soldiers would be prone to take further risks to ensure her safety. They would provide unwanted distractions for the men around them. Therefore, it was for the best to put the women that wanted to be active behind the front and use their sexuality and "womanly guile" to bypass the enemy controls.

The roles of support and maintenance have been a relatively busy sector for women in previous conflicts. Camp followers did not only consist of prostitutes; some women followed their husbands, whilst other soldiers "adopted" field- or

⁴⁰ Alison, 2004, s. 457

⁴¹ Alison, 2004, s. 456

bush wives. Women that took care of the camp and other every-day domestic shores that needed to be done despite the state of war. Other camp followers acted as carriers or guides/scouts. Women have previously been involved in almost every instance of conflict except the fighting itself. Nurses were a big portion of the medical section of fighting units, and they can absolutely be considered as actors in conflict. Nurses may not be expressively supporters for political violence and the continuation of conflict, they may simply be considered as actors that operate within the frames of conflict with humanitarian values in mind. Nevertheless, the existence of medical facilities and medical personnel were contributing to the conflict. This tie in with the identity of motherhood and the role of nurturers. The general notion is that women possess the ability to better take care of people because of their biological role of birthing and taking care of children. If they are supposed to raise children, they must be good at taking care of people in general. This traditional gender stereotyping has affected not only women in conflict, but in general, and it is still considered as quite strong. Most of the professions that include taking care of people, like nursing in medical and health institutions are dominated by women.

The support roles are the closest a person can get to be highly active within the paramilitary organizations without using weapons and violence. The women that were active within these roles were breaking the traditional gender roles as they became active and participated in the conflict, supported fighting parties and directly contributed to conflict. But they did not break the last taboo; wielding violence.

5.5 Family members

The primary identity for women in Northern Ireland, regardless of political, religious or social belonging was motherhood. Even if they did not have children, they were considered as mothers-to-be, and natural caretakers.

The identity of motherhood does not only apply to the notion of having children, but as caretakers and nurturers, as keepers of domestic peace and holders of virtue. They are givers of life, something sacred within the religious context. For those same women to “abandon” the domestic arena and commit to violence is a big discourse that is difficult to accept with the traditional gender perspective. Women were allowed to be a part of peace processes (although the participation of women in high level peace talks is generally minimal) and help mend a broken and divided society after conflict because that’s what mothers do. They fix broken homes and settle disputes⁴². Many women see their chance in gaining agency that way, by embracing the identity as a mother and demanding further legitimacy.

In conflicts that have gone on for as long as the Northern Ireland conflict has, generations has grown up with the conflict and notions of distrust against the other group in mind. The feelings and opinions against the others have been normalized and are being taught to the younger generation as something obvious and timeless. The one that raises children was almost always the mother, or another woman connected to the family. By a young age, the children are being told stories and listens to songs about former war heroes and woes caused by the conflict. The own group is glorified whilst the other side is painted as the enemy and the perpetrator. Mothers should only take active part in the conflict by raising ready and able sons and urging them to join the fight when they are old enough⁴³.

Mari Fitzduff writes that although many women tried to contain the conflict to minimize the effect it would have on their family and local community, they did

⁴² Åhäll, Linda, 2012, *The writing of heroines: Motherhood and female agency in political violence*, s. 290

⁴³ Åhäll, 2012, s. 291

not try to stop the conflict⁴⁴. She continues to write that many of the thousands of the NGOs that existed focused on social issues and on minimizing the effect the conflict had on civilians. They did not focus on ending the conflict altogether and bring peace, just so that innocent people would not be killed or injured.

It was mentioned earlier in the thesis; this type of conflict can both advance and hold back female empowerment and the fight for women's rights. As is the case of several conflicts, women became symbols for the nation, the group and the struggle. Fortunately, this conflict was not plagued by the use of sexual violence as tactic to break the spirit of enemy combatants and defile the symbols. Although some women were physically punished for "fraternizing with the enemy", often by other women⁴⁵, which further shows the internalization that has occurred.

5.6 Women as actors and agents

Several of the roles mentioned in these categories did not challenge the traditional gender roles. The non-violent roles managed to stay within what was deemed as acceptable behaviour for women at the time. They stayed at home as mothers and other family members and supported the combatants in a domestic environment. While they did not challenge gender roles, they did challenge the notion of women as passive and peaceful. The active women in general did not try to stop the conflict or persuade their male family members to stay home and lay down arms.

An internal discourse was present between active women whether which identity and struggle should be prioritized. Some claimed that since there was a larger conflict currently in progress that threatened the respective identity and culture, it should be priority number one and everyone should do what they could to support their own. That would lead to the struggle for women's rights to be laid

⁴⁴ Fitzduff, 2010, s. 3

⁴⁵ Alison, 2004, s. 457

on ice until the conflict was over⁴⁶. The current gender roles were necessary to keep the common identity stable and unified.

Others said the opposite; that the conflict between nationalists and unionists should not disrupt the struggle for equality. The conflict contributed to maintain the very structures that were the biggest obstacles for equality, and by assisting and supporting your side of the conflict, you supported inequality.

Some women and groups realized the value in using the traditional roles and narratives as a tactic to gain valuable information and opportunities. Not only did women use their motherhood as described above; they also took advantage of their sexuality to gain certain advantages.

Dressing up and acting as prostitutes only to ensnare and kill British soldiers is an example of using one's sexuality as a weapon/tool. The example contributes to the narrative of treating women's sexuality as evil, and blaming violent women on their sexuality⁴⁷. By exploiting traditional stereotypes, women actors had great successes as they caught the enemies unaware. With the tactical value of women's roles, it was easier to accept women as legitimate actors.

The discontent with the various treaties during the length of the conflict was widespread. Both parties did not always get what they wanted and most of them eventually failed. Several women that were interviewed by Sandra McEvoy expressed their disappointment in the treaties, and felt betrayed and abandoned by the politicians. This was a general feeling amongst the paramilitaries, depending on the treaty. The Sunningdale agreement 1974 loyalists were angry⁴⁸, in the later agreements, IRA simply refused to uphold the conditions agreed upon, namely disarmament. This was neither a feeling exclusive to gender; both men and women felt this way. It was more dependent on the level of inclusion in the armed struggle. Mainstream opinions and actors were satisfied with the agreements, whilst the far-out extreme violent groups were not.

⁴⁶ Fitzduff, 2010, s. 7

⁴⁷ Sjoberg, Gentry, 2007, s. 42

⁴⁸ McEvoy, 2009, s. 271

As time passed women actors got more and more accepted even within the paramilitary groups. Because of the long time of conflict, people got used to working with women and realized that it was not all that different and that women were just as capable as men, even when practicing violence. Although the traditional gender roles were not wiped out, and misogyny were still very much present in all contexts. Women did not gain full agency during the conflict, but in the end, it ended up at a profit. Women were more accepted in active roles, as it could be seen in the elections linked with the Good Friday Agreement when a party focusing on women's rights gained seats at the peace negotiations and in parliament.

All actors that contribute to the conflict, violent as well as non-violent, can be considered as spoilers. They give the fighting parties legitimacy and the sustainability to continue the conflict. When the time came to agree on peace treaties, large portions of the population from both sides opposed them and instead wanted to continue pushing for their agenda. The opposition was by no means homogenised, and included women as well as men. It showed that although women actors were not as prepared to use violence, they were nonetheless as willing to continue the conflict to uphold the identity of their side in the conflict.

The discontent among the population over the different peace treaties could be problematic, and was the cause of their breaking down. The Good Friday Agreement is still in place, but not everyone is happy about it. Some loyalists still think that it is no different from the previous treaties and that the British government is giving up⁴⁹ and that their protestant identity and culture is being threatened. The groups that disagree with the treaties could evolve to potential active spoilers, and disrupt the peace that the treaty has built. It has been done in the past. These opinions are not gendered though, and both men and women feel alike. It is more based on the level of involvement in the paramilitary groups that seem to affect the animosity towards the peace. People that had made sacrifices and lost loved ones and had gotten heavily involved in paramilitary groups lost a sense of purpose⁵⁰

⁴⁹ McEvoy, 2009, s. 275-278

⁵⁰ McEvoy, 2009, s. 276

6 Conclusion

The Northern Ireland conflict resulted in contradictory tendencies regarding gender and agency. The conflict experienced traditional ethno-national values which reinforced the patriarchal gender roles in which women were regarded as passive non-actors with little agency. Women were victims that should be protected and be left out of the public and violent scene.

On the other hand the conflict also gave women opportunity to claim agency and gain actorship in roles that were traditionally male, or roles where women were commonplace and accepted, even though it meant that they took an active part in the conflict. Of course, gender roles did not have total control over peoples actions and were not the primary identity in which people conformed themselves unto. It is also difficult to generalize the level of female agency during a 30 year-period. Societies and values can change dramatically during such a time span, especially considering the period was from 1969 to 1999. During that time period, a lot of things happened that changed the global political climate and the way people behaved and lived. The inclusion of women in combat roles started out slow and traditional, with much masculine insecurity and unfamiliarity towards the situation. Later, people learned to accept the fact when they got used to their presence and experienced the little differences between the two sexes during combat. Early adopters of female spied and smugglers gained a significant advantage on the other side's stereotypical view of gender and security. Later, the lessons were learned and counter-measures were developed. Women did not pass checkpoints as easy as previously, and British soldiers learned how to behave during patrols.

The majority of men were not members of paramilitary organizations, and most of the families in Northern Ireland remained intact. Most mothers did not raise terrorists or paramilitaries, and just as some wives probably convinced their husbands to take up arms, more probably did the contrary, and insisted otherwise.

By not counting women as potential actors for violence, and therefore not granting full agency, is highly relevant to the problem of not including women in

peace talks and in high-level negotiations. How can there be equality when women are still excluded from conflict? It does not matter that they are included in peace talks if they are not allowed to participate in the thing that caused the talks to be necessary. It decreases their agency and is still operating on the terms of others.

While women are seen as victims in conflict, men are considered as casualties, regardless of their involvement. Only 8.9% (322 of the deaths caused by the conflict were women, out of a total of 3600⁵¹). This is the result of traditional gender roles that in the end hurtful to all. It puts pressure on men and stifles women, as well as essentializing both genders.

The dominant identity that hindered women from gaining full agency and equal opportunity as actors was the identity of motherhood. People that brought life to the world should not be a part in taking it or even in the conflict in general. They should support their husbands and family members, but should not take any part in the conflict beyond that. All women were considered as potential mothers and in possession of the values linked to motherhood. These values were considered to be nurturing, peaceful and everything else that constitutes as being a good mother. It also resulted in the notion that mothers and women were naturally peaceful and opposed violence and conflict. But reality shows a different case, where women disregarded the traditional identities and claimed actorship and agency and could therefore be considered as an equal participant in the conflict because of the individual's actorship, and not gender.

⁵¹ Fitzduff, 2010, s. 5

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