and make a difficult read of a book which contributes usefully to our knowledge of women's experiences of men's violence.

Jane Ellis

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Gender, democracy and inclusion in Northern Ireland

Carmel Roulston, Celia Davies (Eds.); Palgrave, Hampshire, 2000, ISBN: 0-333-76066-2 (Pbk) £15.99

This collection of essays assesses women's contribution to democracy and peace in Northern Ireland. I am often struck by the extent to which women writing about Northern Ireland are not just academic researchers but are often activists, actual participants in the processes they describe. This collection is no exception and brings together a range of contributors who have experienced varied aspects of political life in this contested region. This collection clearly benefits from the fusion of academic analysis and community involvement. While noting the relative

invisibility of women in Northern Irish political structures, it helps to challenge the construction of 'Politics' with the kind of politics that women are often involved at a local, community level. In the context of Northern Ireland where the differences between 'communities' have been so entrenched, it is hardly surprising that women too have felt deeply divided by religion, tradition, identity and community. As Eilish Rooney notes in Chapter 8, 'The notion that women's active participation in politics is necessarily or essentially progressive or emancipatory for women qua women is fallacious. Women evidently see their political activity as valuable in promoting the interests of their collectivity' (p. 168). This book highlights the challenge for women's activism in seeking not to deny difference but rather to find points of commonality that can facilitate dialogue and understanding.

Although Northern Ireland is usually viewed as deeply polarized, the realities are more complex. As Grainne McCoy notes in Chapter 1, the problems of poverty and unemployment, for example, cut across community divides and may provide the grounds for some cooperation between community groups. Nevertheless, it is not always easy for women from the different communities, especially in socially deprived areas, to come together. Cross-community cooperation can provoke disapproval, intimidation and even violence. This point is borne out by the case studies in this edited collection. The book contains four case studies that each highlight the particular experiences and strategies of groups and organizations within Northern Ireland. These case studies are very useful in helping to illustrate the points raised in the other more theoretical chapters. They are very readable and will be of interest to students and teachers as they visibly demonstrate the complexities but also the possibilities in Northern Irish society.

This is clearly illustrated in Chapter 3 that examines the Chrysalis Centre run by women on a poor housing estate. The group is sensitive to local needs and that means being inclusive not simply of Catholic and Protestant women but also the other less visible groups in the local community; travellers, Moslems and other ethnic groups. The centre also sought to empower women through participation in its own democratic structures. Its inclusive and consensus building decision-making processes not only gave women a sense of ownership but also helped them to develop valuable skills.

Similarly, the Cornerstone project, discussed in Chapter 4, also tries to promote inclusiveness. It is also based in a socially deprived area. In fact, this ecumenical group bringing together people from all the main Christian religions, set up their premises at the interface between two deeply divided but equally poor communities — the Protestant Shankill and the Catholic Falls districts of Belfast. 'This is known as an interface area, a point of confrontation between working class neighbourhoods marked by sectarian violence and tension. A few yards away from Cornerstone's home, you can see part of a high wall with large metal gates. The wall marks what became known — without any real intent of

irony – as the peace line’ (p. 70). This wall physically embodies the divisions that Cornerstone seeks to overcome.

Chapter 5 examines the changing role of trade unions in Northern Ireland through a case study of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance. This chapter highlights the ways in which religion can be a source of tension and misunderstanding even in organizations that allegedly seek to challenge discrimination and inequality. Although one may not be explicitly asked to state one’s religion, one is still defined and identified by ‘perceived religion’. Name, schooling, neighbourhood, etc. may be used to infer one’s perceived religion even if one has no particular religion.

Chapter 6 offers a lively and at times humorous account of the early experiences of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition. Set up in 1996, the group was an active participant in the multi-party peace talks in the late 1990s and won two seats at the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in 1998. The coalition aims to overcome the shifting divisions of Northern Irish politics and instead offers an approach based on listening, inclusiveness and working together. When the two women took their seats in the Assembly in July 1998 they caused a furore by refusing to declare themselves either Nationalist or Unionist. The ensuing debate was carried live on television and clearly demonstrated the difficulties of dealing with difference in Northern Ireland.

The final section of the book has two chapters that offer an overview of the four case studies and a theoretical analysis. Elizabeth Porter offers a feminist approach to how dialogue and participatory democracy might work in Northern Ireland. She suggests that real communication can only occur where dialogue across difference provides the ethical impulse. Eilish Rooney concludes the book by stating that ‘the ability to imagine a future where sectarianism and political violence are disputed in language alone is where, I hope, our conversations are leading’ (p. 181).

There is a strong coherence across all the chapters in this book. Although the book engages with a range of theoretical issues and concepts, for those readers not familiar with the complexities of Northern Ireland, the four case studies at the heart of the book are particularly interesting and readable and informative. While outlining and explaining many of the continuing divisions and tensions within this divided society, the book also contains a strong element of hope that probably springs from the context of the late 1990s when the book was written. As the book demonstrates, it is important that this hope and confidence in the future peace and democracy of Northern Ireland is sustained in the 21st century.

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