Gender and Nationalism:
An Analysis of Women as ‘Peacemakers’

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Abstract

In nationalist conflict women’s roles and participation are largely shaped by their image as “peacemakers.” Two systems of power, nationalism and sexism, place women in subordinate roles. In both systems, women’s utility is in nurturing, pacifism, and peace making between communities. But there are holes in this “peacemaker” archetype that largely go undiscussed. By examining republican women in Northern Ireland, and their involvement in The Troubles, and black women’s involvement the South African Apartheid resistance, we can see how external factors like paramilitary activity, shape interactions with the “peacemaker” archetype.
II. Nationalism and the Social Landscape

Nationalist conflict, which centers around group identity, naturally creates an “us” vs. “them” mentality. But this mentality is not reserved for just ethnic group against ethnic group. This mindset seeps into other social spheres. “Us” versus “them” begins to shape relations within the groups themselves. The dichotomy becomes an overarching theme with the way nationalism naturalizes and normalizes domination. Gender hierarchy, being the most naturalized hierarchy, is amplified in its intersections with nationalism.

In her work *Gendered Nationalism: Reproducing ‘Us’ versus ‘Them,*' V. Spike Peterson explains that nationalism constructs group identity in gendered terms (Spike Peterson 1998, 47). Gender hierarchy of masculine over feminine and “the nationalist domination of insiders over outsiders” are tightly linked mindsets (Spike Peterson 1998, 47). The two systems encourage each other. Nationalism depends on prior naturalization of domination and Spike Peterson argues domination has always meant “men/masculinity over women/femininity” (47). Thus, nationalism perpetuates the power structure of men over women.

In her work *Keeping the Fires Burning: Militarization and the Politics of Gender in South Africa,* scholar Jackie Cock adds another dichotomy to the mix. She introduces the peacemaker archetype. Just as nationalism establishes “us” versus “them,” “insider” versus “outsider,” and masculine versus feminine, it too divides makers of war and makers of peace. In the war system, women are seen as pacifists, as nurturing, and as peacemakers (Cock 1987, 1). Violence and militancy are patriarchal institutions that women are excluded from (1). This is a commonly studied phenomenon within gender studies and is a crucial dichotomy in analyzing nationalism. This idea that is widely discussed and widely accepted. Moving forward we’ll call this phenomenon the “peacemaker theory.”
II. Case Study: Northern Ireland and South Africa

But how has the peacemaker theory held up in reality? Two cases of nationalist conflict in particular offer us two very different answers to that question. Republican women throughout The Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968 – 1998) and black women in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa from the 1970s to the early 1990s interacted very differently with their perception as peacemakers. Republican women in Northern Ireland largely confronted this archetype while black women in South Africa did not. This case study examines solely republican women (as opposed to both republican and loyalist women) and solely black women (as opposed to both black and white South African women) in their respective conflicts. Their contrasting interactions with the archetype is curious considering the many structural similarities between the two conflicts. For example, both are divided societies where the dominant communities originated as settler populations. These settler populations asserted dominance over the indigenous groups and laid claims to the land. Moving forward, these governments established by the dominant communities both tried to forge allegiance from the indigenous communities to the state.

In “Northern Ireland and South Africa: ‘Hope and History at a Crossroads,’” Padraig O’Malley adds to the list of similarities. He explains both governments “pursued policies that supplemented military measures” when allegiance from indigenous groups was not forged easily or opposition was met (O’Malley 2001, 277). To combat terrorist activity against their governments, both increased “the use of the judicial process and both ended up subverting the judicial process” (277). And both continued to paint the problem of increasing political violence in their states as matters of law and order and national security (277). Both countries acknowledged the similarities during the conflict and retroactively. By the 1980s, comparisons to
the African National Congress were a component of republican propaganda and rhetoric in Northern Ireland (Guelke 1996, 134). Murals displayed women from the South West African People Organisation (SWAPO) alongside women from Cumann n mBan (134).

These structural similarities make it possible to conduct a case study on the two conflicts and more importantly, they make it possible to apply a gendered lens. If there was no basis of comparison it would be impossible to look at how the women in each conflict interacted with the peacemaker archetype.

For as widely compared as the two conflicts are, of course there are important differences. In both Northern Ireland and South Africa the indigenous communities represented very different proportions of the population, which greatly affected outcomes in negotiations process. Violence and militant activity played very different roles in each conflict. In Northern Ireland, the start of “The Troubles” was marked by intensified political violence. Over 3,600 people died over the 30-year period which was largely defined by its violent paramilitary activity. Paramilitaries on both sides were often deemed terrorist organizations, carrying out attacks on each other, on civilians, and on mainland Britain.

Contrastingly, major forces behind Apartheid resistance like the African National Congress, relied on legal forms of protests in its early days and then focused on nonviolent direct action until the Apartheid system was defeated. The ANC did experiment with violent and militant tactics when Nelson Mandela and other leaders called for armed action. But they abandoned this approach in realization that there were limits to violent conflict and nonviolence was forging the movement forward. This mindset carried them into 1992.
III. The Effects of Paramilitary Activity

The difference of militant activity in the two conflicts cannot be understated. It is this factor that shapes the involvement of women in both conflicts. It is the presence of violence that shapes both groups’ interaction with the peacemaker archetype. It is this context that clarifies holes left by the peacemaker theory.

In fact, the presence of violence twists women’s involvement in the conflict in an unexpected way. If women are defaulted as peacemakers, then one might assume that nonviolent conflict, with its less radical tactics, less militant activity, and greater focus on negotiations, would offer greater opportunity for female participation. By analyzing Northern Ireland and South Africa we find it is not so clean cut.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the focus on violence, maintained by the tactics of several paramilitary groups, offered women a window of opportunity for involvement within the conflict. Of course nationalism and gender hierarchy were linked throughout The Troubles, like Spike Peterson explains. Women fell into the rigid “us” versus “them” dichotomy; alleged to one ethnic groups over another, while also falling victim to the “masculine/man” over “feminine/women dichotomy” (Spike Peterson 1998, 47). They would never be at the helm of either ethnic group. But what both Spike Peterson and the peacemaker theory don’t address is how the relationship between nationalism and gender hierarchy can be warped when a nationalist conflict is dominated by paramilitary activity.

In her work Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security, Miranda Alison directly confronts the peacemaker archetype in the context of The Troubles. She examines the archetype’s persistence in the context of intense political activity. She “challenges the idea that women are necessarily more peaceful than men by looking at examples of female combatants in
ethno-nationalist military organizations in...Northern Ireland” (Alison 2004, 447). She argues that paramilitaries offer a greater window of participation for women because they operate outside of institutional and state norms. She continues, “Theoretical analysis suggests that anti-state (working against the existing state authority) so-called ‘liberatory’ nationalisms often provide a greater degree of ideological and practical space for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms” (448). Alison explains that paramilitaries in Northern Ireland specifically offered this window because the contemporary conflict “privatized violence” (452). Civilians were continuously brought into the conflict and the home front boundary was blurred. The historical “separation of (male) belligerents and inhabitants” thus collapsed and with it the dichotomy of the aggressive man and the peacemaker woman was disturbed (452).

Mia Bloom, author of Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists, mirrors Alison’s argument. When comparing nationalist conflicts, Bloom explains, women in regions with paramilitary activity experience more “choice.” These organizations offer them more autonomy and options for leadership roles (qtd. Brettschneider 2014).

But it’s important to note Alison does not argue that violence breaks the gender hierarchy and establishes perfect gender relations. Certainly it’s no utopia when paramilitaries are at the forefront of a conflict. Even within these ‘liberatory’ organizations women were second class actors. And the role of the female combatant was surrounded by unease and confusion (Alison 2004, 458). She argues the female combatant is established within the paramilitary organization, but it is never quite a comfortable fit. The female combatant is such a push against deep rooted gender roles that it creates tension with surrounding male combatants. She argues “the role of the
female combatant is ambiguous and indicates a tension between different conceptualizations of societal security” (447).

Alison’s points here are a crucial digression because while she challenges the peacemaker theory and Spike Peterson, she also reaffirms the firm link between nationalism and gender hierarchy. Alison adds a strong element of reality because she takes the peacemaker theory with a grain of salt. She concludes that factors such as modern paramilitary activity can change our established ideas of women in nationalist conflict. Violence may offer a real, however brief, window of participation for women. But this is not a panacea for gender relations. Gender hierarchy will continue to have its white knuckled grip on the social landscape and nationalist mindsets will only solidify this grip.

Unlike The Troubles in Northern Ireland, Apartheid resistance in South Africa had a firm focus on nonviolence. This focus leads one to assume there would be a large window of opportunity for female actors in the movement. And for the most part, black women are credited for their influence within Apartheid resistance (Russell 2003, 24). There is a great amount of literature written about black women’s grassroots organizing, their large scale protests, their boycotts, and their marches. But the focus away from violence and militancy within the movement offers a very different window of participation for South African women than the window observed for republican women in Northern Ireland.

Throughout The Troubles women’s opportunity to engage in the conflict was defined by their ability to challenge the peacemaker archetype. How well could they embrace the domination dichotomy of nationalism? And in a way, how well could they adopt traditionally masculine characteristics and shed their femininity? Contrastingly, for black women in South Africa, their participation was still largely ruled by the peacemaker archetype. Their roles often
complimented the characteristics outlined by the theory. They had little leadership roles within the African National Congress and largely operated in supportive roles. Their success in participating in the conflict lied in their ability to compliment the peacemaker archetype. This was their utility and if they wanted to be utilized and useful they were to not disrupt this role.

In her study of the anti-apartheid movement, Diana E. H. Russell found that only 5 to 12 percent of political detainees were women. Women were also largely underrepresented in not only leadership positions, but also in the “rank-and-file movement” (Russell 2003, 24.) The female activists she interviewed traced this gap in leadership to “women’s internalized sense of inferiority... their lack of assertiveness, and the strong beliefs in traditional gender roles that still prevail in African cultures” (24). Russell highlights a takeaway on these women’s supportive role. She says, “the women I interviewed recognized the crucial role women play in engaging men to be politically active,” and these women supported “their male activist relatives in whatever way necessary” (24).

Anne McClintock, in her work “No Longer a Future in Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,” also examines the supportive role black women played in Apartheid resistance. She notes “While the language of the ANC was the inclusive language of national unity, the Congress was in fact male, exclusive, and hierarchical” (McClintock 1995, 114). McClintock argues that since the beginning of the movement “women's potential militancy was muted, and their political agency domesticated, by the language of female service and subordination” (115). Their participation was only approved if it served the movement’s liberation interests and was auxiliary and supportive (115). McClintock does note that black women’s relationship with nationalism shifted throughout the years and their roles expanded as the movement went on. The need for women's full participation in the liberation movement was realized and thus their roles
gradually grew. But even as the Apartheid system was dismantled, women, their roles and their legal rights, were still positioned as the handmaiden to national movement (117).

**IV. Further Evidence: Women in Negotiations**

Black women’s complementary interaction with the peacemaker archetype is only furthered confirmed when we analyze their role in negotiations. If we follow the thinking established by this archetype, women would be of use to ethnic groups at the time of negotiations. The negotiations to dismantle Apartheid follows this thinking. Despite having an auxiliary role from the 1960s up until the 1990s, women saw their window of participation open in negotiations. In fact, women’s participation in the transition period to democracy is widely discussed among feminist scholars and viewed as a success story (Hassim 2002, 693). Tying our two conflicts even further, republican women saw the stake South African women had in negotiations and the results they were able to achieve as an inspiration (693).

In her work ‘*A Conspiracy of Women*: The Women’s Movement in South Africa’s Transition to Democracy*, Shireen Hassim argues that South African women’s presence in peace talks offer a successful framework. Black women defied the usual trajectory for women’s rights groups both in negotiations and in postnationalist reconstruction (Hassim 2002, 693). Defying this trajectory means that women’s rights in South Africa did not backslide and women did not experience increased marginalization. Hassim outlines how women had relatively little influence and leadership within the anti-apartheid movement itself, but during the transition to democracy were able to insert “gender equality concerns into the heart of democratic debates” (694).

Hassim flushes this out by explaining that prior to negotiations, female leadership in anti-apartheid groups had completely collapsed “during two states of emergency,” and women largely diverted their energies “from organizing women per se, to keeping alive the anti-apartheid
movement” (694). She credits the newfound success in negotiations and reconstruction to three main factors. These factors are “the new political opportunities offered by the transition from Apartheid to democracy, the creation of an autonomous organization for representing the women’s movement, and the consolidation of the notion of equality within the African National Congress” (694).

Women’s groups in Northern Ireland, unlike those in South Africa, did follow the typical “trajectory” Hassim discusses. They did not have the stake in negotiations that South African women had and attention to gender equality concerns in reconstruction reflected this. Just as the influence of South African women in negotiations reaffirms their image as peacemakers, republican women’s lack of influence in negotiations reaffirms their challenging of the peacemaker archetype throughout the conflict.

Republican women’s lack of influence stems from the narrow representation of women at the peace talks. In Gender Politics in Transitional Justice, Catherine O’Rourke discusses the “selective inclusion” of women in the peace negotiations (O’Rourke 2013). She argues that it was only “non-partisan, peace-brokering women who were included, rather than partisans and combatants” (O’Rourke 2013). O’Rourke confirms both the peacemaker theory and republican women’s clash with it. She concludes that women’s representation in peace talks were only permitted to the extent that it complemented traditional ideas of femininity and its link to peacefulness (O’Rourke 2013). The selective inclusion in peace talks hurt republican women because it cut out some of the most dynamic voices from the equation-- women who had done substantial groundwork throughout The Troubles for the republican cause. These women were the ones predominantly combating the peacemaker archetype.
Republican women’s lack of influence can be proven by using black women’s work in negotiations as a model framework. We can then apply the three factors outlined above to the peace talks in Northern Ireland. We’ll find that none of the three factors were met.

Northern Ireland’s failure to meet the first factor is more circumstantial that indicative to gender’s role in the conflict. Black South African women saw such substantial “new political opportunities” because of the level of transition that was occurring in governing. The South African government completely scrapped the previous electoral system and established universal suffrage on a non-racial basis for the first time in the nation’s history. This dramatic democratic transition offered a blank slate on which to craft a new electoral framework. And with this window, women were able to throw their hat into the ring. Northern Ireland did not have this level of democratic transition or level of scrapping the old electoral system.

As for the second factor, republican women never formed an autonomous and united organization outside the republican cause to represent women’s rights. In South Africa, the Women’s National Coalition (WNC) served this role. The WNC was the strategic and mobilizing vehicle for feminist causes that worked outside of the ANC. It formed a wide coalition across already established women’s groups and its independence from the ANC was crucial (Hassim 2002, 695). During negotiations this autonomy “allowed the WNC to exert pressure for accountability in a way that could not be contained by the internal mechanisms of party discipline and loyalty” (695).

One might assume the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) would be Northern Ireland’s equivalent to the WNC because of its seat at negotiations and its autonomy from partisan groups. The NIWC was effective at lobbying for gender concerns in the peace talks, but its lack of constitutional stance hindered the leveraging power it could offer republican women.
To sufficiently check off the second factor in this framework, republican women would’ve needed an autonomous and united women’s organization with a republican focus. Instead, republican women formed hundreds groups, all with varying stances on constitutional issues, the use of violence, the needed focus on gender issues, etc. (McWilliams 1995, 17).

The third factor in this framework is the consolidation of the notion of equality within the anti-apartheid movement’s driving force, the ANC. At the time of negotiations, the ANC made a formal commitment to include “women at all levels of decision making and gender equality concerns in policy frameworks” (Hassim 2002, 696). This shift in commitment insured women’s demands were heard moving forward. The ANC’s shift here cannot be understated. Hassim argues that although it was slow to reach this pivot, “the existence of a strong political party that favored a structural transformation rather than merely a transfer of power” and was committed to eradicating gender inequalities set the tone for women’s seat at the table (695). Contrastingly, Northern Ireland did not have a political party serving this role and therefore did not have this consolidation.

A strong example of the lack of commitment to gender concerns outside of women’s groups lies in the response to the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform’s (NIWEP) “Genderproofing the Election System and Talks Fora” paper. In 1996, both the Irish and British governments asked for suggestions of how Northern Ireland Forum election should be conducted. In their submission, the NIWEP demanded equalizing the elections on the basis of gender (McGilloway 1996). This meant ensuring men and women had an equal chance of being selected as candidates for the talks. Of all the parties preparing for the Forum, only Sinn Fein and the Secretary of State responded. The Northern Ireland Office did not include any suggestions on “genderproofing” submitted by the NIWEP in the elections (McGilloway 1996).
V. Conclusion

And thus this third factor solidifies Northern Ireland’s “typical” trajectory within negotiations. Unlike black women in South Africa, republican women did not have a substantial stake in peace talks and gender equality concerns were drowned out. This disparity is the bookend of two very different interactions with the peacemaker theory and archetype. Both groups of women are credited influence within their respective conflicts. But, black women’s role in the struggle against Apartheid was largely compatible with the peacemaker archetype, while republican women’s role was defined by their ability to challenge this archetype. This is a curious disparity given the structural similarities of the two conflicts. This causes us to question the peacemaker theory and archetype. When we analyze these two conflicts though, a crucial factor appears to be the presence of violence and paramilitary activity. Contrary to what one might assume, this militant activity was a window of opportunity to confront the peacemaker archetype and gain substantial influence in the conflict. For republican women in Northern Ireland, paramilitary activity offered alternative avenues for participation outside traditional organizational structures. This level of violence flipped the status quo on its head, and women were no longer confined strictly to the bottom of the chain of command. Intense violence disrupted if only temporarily, established nationalist and sexist mindsets; a historical footnote that is often skimmed over.


O’Malley, Padraig. “Northern Ireland and South Africa: ‘Hope and History at a Crossroads.’” in


