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# Different Together

*Women in Belfast*

**Photo Narrative by Cynthia Cockburn**



Turf Lodge, the Shankill, Twinbrook, Ballybeen, Malone Road - say where you live in Belfast and it pins an identity tag on you: working-class, Catholic, nationalist-going-on-Republican. Or Protestant and poor, recently re-housed. Or aspiring integrationist middle-class.



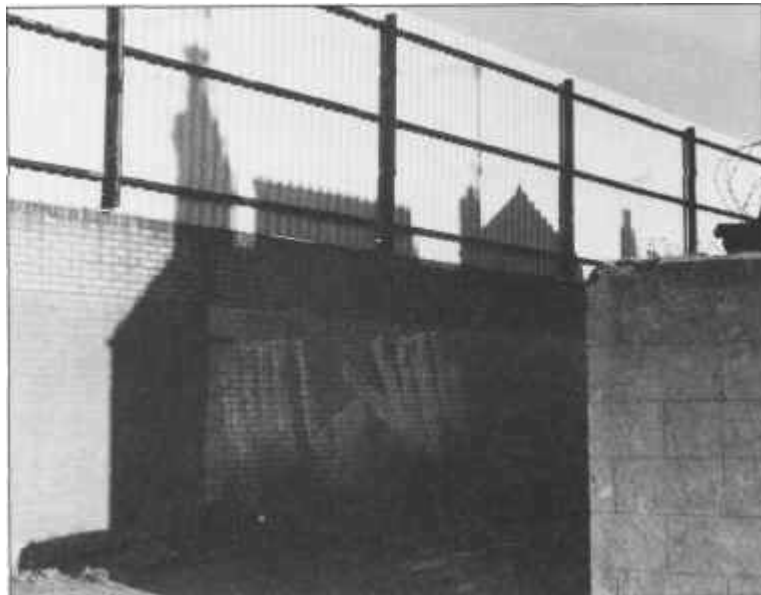
To drive the knowledge home, territory is colour-coded, on police maps and in reality. Kerb stones painted red, white and blue, the stencilled hand of the Ulster Volunteer Force tell you: this is Protestant space. Gaelic, murals of the Great Famine and lamp posts ringed in green, white and gold assert: the IRA rules here.



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Belfast's walls are crusty with paint: graffiti shouting hurt and rage are painted once, painted out, painted in again. Housing areas are crusty with barbed wire, peace lines, crash barriers and fancy architected fences - erected to give security forces an illusion of control.



*So called 'Peace line' separating the Loyalist area of the Shankill Road from the Republican Falls Road*

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*RUC barracks in residential West Belfast*



The ceasefires have given everyone a welcome breather, but watchfulness and territoriality are habits you don't break overnight. The soldiers are still there in barracks. Poverty and unemployment haven't gone anywhere either.

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But Belfast is shaped by its contradictions. Tatty but sort of lovely. The ugliness of bricked-up windows and gaping roofs is redeemed by the smell of damp grass from the ring-around of green mountains. And the narrower its ghettos the more alive their sense of community.



One thing: there are more active talented resourceful women-working-with-women in working-class Belfast than in most places in Britain. Advice, refuge, support for young mothers, a chance of training, these things have flowered all over the place. Such projects are under-resourced. But they persist because public facilities are scant, and women make good with their own energy.

At the core of this collective provision is an array of Women's Centres, most of them deep in either Catholic/Republican or Protestant/Loyalist terrain. Some are still in old housing stock where they began, some have rooms in community centres or even purpose-built space. They provide a friendly drop-in corner, a creche, a locus for campaigning and courses in a range of things: personal development, carpentry, aqua-fit.



*Women Too, the Windsor Women's Centre, is one of (currently) seven women's centres in working class communities of Greater Belfast.*



*Centres have campaigned for playspace*



*Who takes liberties with Irish masculinity? Advertisement for toilet roll.*

Belfast women's activism is a small but bold counter-current to the field of violence in which they live. The violence is official, military, political, criminal and often very very personal. Him indoors, local paramilitary commands and the authorities are not overjoyed by women's self-organising, but don't have the nerve to attack it openly.

An *if* and a *may-be*: if the ceasefires hold, can masculinity be decommissioned?



*Taking the piss with a limp spring-roll: is the new generation of girls headed for more autonomy?*



*Low-paid male manual workers contemplate Louise Walsh's sculpture Monument to the Low-paid Women Workers.*



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*First get-together of the North Belfast young women's network, which spans Catholic and Protestant areas*



Learning trust through daring to climb: women from Poleglass estate

In Northern Ireland there is an extensive official and voluntary sector Community Relations industry that beavers away for Reconciliation. Its funding criteria seem to invite staged cross-community encounters, cultural exchanges and mutual confessions of prejudice. It is about a setting-aside of difference.

By contrast, the Women's Centres don't blame personal sectarianism for the war, so much as an oppressive state, unrepresentative politicians and inept policies. So they start somewhere else: invest in women and in community development. If you enable self-respect in brutally impoverished communities, they believe, respect for the Other will follow.

However you look at it, women's organising builds bridges. The community workers themselves manifest mixity: lesbian and heterosexual, university-educated and community-educated. Some coordinators of Catholic origin are working in Women's Centres on Protestant territory and vice versa. While the war was on this was often dangerous. But women were vigilant for each other.





One of the first things women's centres establish: a drop-in crèche.



Several centres provide space and support for school-age girls.

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Learning *unaccustomed*  
manual trades

Day-to-day working is consciously anti-sectarian, but being 'other' may mean being South Asian or Chinese, not only the one you call 'Prod' or 'Taig'. Activities often involve groups (of teenagers, say, or the Golden Girls) getting together with those from the other community, somewhere on neutral ground but without trumpeting it too much.

The Centres help each other. In 1989, when the Belfast City Council cancelled the funding of the Falls Women's Centre, impugning it as an IRA front, the Women's Centre of the deeply Loyalist Shankill led a protest against this finger-pointing and political vetting.

*Different together*



*This group of older women  
call themselves The Golden Girls*

*A different difference: not Protestant and Catholic, but Protestant and Muslim*





*Meeting of the Women's Support Network: how are working-class women to get a voice in a new Northern*

That was the moment the Centres set up a Women's Support Network in which they now work together. They aim to see women present in the processes that will shape the post-ceasefire Northern Ireland and to get equity for women in the sharing of the new funds promised by peace.

The Network is, they say, a *collective feminist* voice of women's projects in working-class Belfast.

Individually women hold onto their political identities - some long for a united Ireland, others feel deeply threatened by the idea. But they have identified a commonality in being women, being community based and being angry at injustice and inequality, that allows them to affirm and even welcome this and other kinds of difference.



*This essay derives from a research project on gender and cross-communal relations in conflict zones, carried out by the author in the Centre for Research in Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change, City University, London. We hope this will be the first of a series of three such essays in Soundings, subsequent issues representing women's projects in Bosnia and Israel. Thanks to the Lipman Trust and Womankind Worldwide for grants towards materials. And a resounding thank you to the women in Belfast whose skill and courage sustain the initiative described here.*