

The Role of Women in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

***Las Hijas de Erin*,¹ by Silvia Calamati.
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Almost nine years have passed since the Belfast Peace Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement) was signed. Thereafter, Northern Ireland has gone through several ups and downs. The complexities of the conflict and the high number of parties involved have exacerbated the difficulty of the process. There have been, however, remarkable advances: the Irish Republican Army (IRA) decommissioned its arsenal of weapons in July 2005 and its legal political arm – Sinn Féin – has recently publicly acknowledged British police and judges.

The impact of these two events, however, can lead to a loss of perspective. This conflict stems from confrontations among several actors: on the one hand, political parties; and on the other hand, paramilitary groups supporting one party or another, the police, the military, and the population. They are all involved in one way or another, against a backdrop of religious identities and nationalisms.

The relatively recent peace process in Northern Ireland represents an exception to the European norm. It is the only peace process with clear prospects of stability, and at the same time, the only long term conflict to which, after numerous decades, resolution seems possible.

For several decades Northern Irish society has been divided and fractured due to political motives that have also been wrongly redirected towards a religious battle. The division is only one: nationalists (catholic in general) on one side, and unionists (protestant in general) on the other. This, however, does not imply assuming an identity between politics and religion. This is not the case.

Among all social groups, the role of women in conflict in general, and in Northern Ireland in particular, has been principally marked by oblivion. Women have been constantly ignored by entire populations, or rather, by their leaders.

Las Hijas de Erin, through the tragic testimonies of victims, takes the reader through the internal sufferings of the different every day aspects of the conflict. It comprises stories by several women of the nationalist community, in which real life experiences illustrate the period between the late 1960s and the end of the past century – thirty years of experiences connected to loss, abandonment, poverty and, at the same time, continuous overcoming.

One of the greatest assets of this book is the way in which it captures the local environment, even though it is based mainly on abrupt, isolated facts. Albeit the narrative's focus on specific dramatic moments, the perceived anguish throughout the book leads to reflection, and appropriation of the criticism as a result.

Silvia Calamati reviews the different every day aspects of a fractured society and analyses how each part is radically affected by the existence of an armed conflict. Wars are not only the patrimony of the poor.

¹ The Daughters of Erin. Original title in Italian, *Figlia di Erin*.

While the majority of women referred to in this book belong to the first world, they also belong to the nationalist working class of the Ulster region: women that defend humble families, and have ordinary lives and jobs.

The book is intelligently structured in twelve parts, each approaching a specific aspect of the conflict. Thereafter, it embarks on the real path between the theoretical aspect and empirical, painful stories. At the same time, it reviews the constant human rights violations in Northern Ireland, making use of names, surnames and dates, and experiences which intertwine to conform a way of overcoming suffering from different perspectives.

A Celtic Goddess opens the door to each section. From Ériu to Oonagh, a brief description of a deity leads to the testimonies. It is a clever way of advancing history's circular characteristics – images that are based on the introduction of the book make a comparison between the women being studied and the standing stones in commune with the wind at the Aran Islands, on the very western edge of the European continent.

It also provides an overview, although not an in-depth analysis, of violations of specific and inherent rights of the person that occurred, in one way or another, within the nationalist community. Subsequently, it examines the effects of these violations on families and entire communities, and on ways of living that people have to adopt in certain violent circumstances.

There have been several attempts to identify a shared concept with respect to war. It seems that this is not the case with Ulster. Instead, throughout the study, it is possible to see how fine the line between war and 'conflict' is. A great part of the book refers to war issues, from the first dispatch of British soldiers in 1969 to the terrible conditions at the Long Kesh prison: detention centres, the *modus operandi* of police and paramilitary organisations, the so-called 'death squads', and rubber bullets, which were replaced by plastic bullets (plastic baton round, or PBR). Several chapters directly warn us about the violence and segregation that existed in Northern Ireland.

A necessary legal framework

All testimonies were collected between 1990 and 1998. None of the women interviewed were aware at the time of the upcoming agreement that would indicate the official (not extra-official) commencement of the peace in Ulster.

It was not until 1998 that human rights protection became one of the main objectives of the Belfast Peace Agreement, and thus the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) was created.

The NIHRC was charged with carrying out a survey among the Northern Irish population and advising the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his mission: to determine other rights related to the territory's particular circumstances which are not reflected on the European Convention on Human Rights. The Commission is thus charged with giving shape and form to the so-called Bill of Rights, a cluster of rights which encompasses those included in the European Convention and those specific to the Northern Irish case.

The aim of these rights is that they should be protected according to determined principles. Always advocating an independent approach (albeit public financing), emphasis is placed on the respect for international human rights standards. During 2006, efforts have centred, amongst other issues, on counter-terrorism measures, immigration procedures, improvements on the living conditions of detained women,

and preparation to advise the government on the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Silvia Calamati dedicates the last chapters to hopeful, yet terribly dark, testimonies from conflict victims, who argue that positive change in the name of the public good can be achieved through shared convictions and joint work, even when there are deep political differences.

The growing number of organisations of women (affected one way or another) with a background of deaths or psychological abuse at work, is the first glimmer of hope. At the beginning, they are made up of women who suffer the same problems and in similar ways. With time, organisations from both communities start to collaborate, united by the shared wish for peace.

The meaning of the concept of peace, however, has lost part of its strength. Given the acceptance of the Right of Peoples to Peace,² and the consideration of the Right to Peace as a Human Right, the intrinsic essence of its definition should be attended to. Either as a lack of violence, or as calmness, tranquillity, stillness.

In the Northern Irish case, the longed-for peace concept surely refers to tranquillity in its broadest sense: the lack of violence.

A place where all the human rights that *Las Hijas de Erin* silently claims can be enjoyed: from freedom of movement to freedom of expression; from persecuting threat offences to guaranteeing the rights of the detainee and the prisoner, be him a political prisoner or not.

The abuse of power is present in every testimony, unfolding the actions of the police and the army, or the incursions of unionist paramilitary groups (several times with the consent of the security forces). In every case testimonies are marked by sentiments of defencelessness, and perhaps, resignation.

Sentiments that remain until there are answers, which arise when a community tries to understand its enemy's position – working together for the right to life of the sons and daughters of both communities. In this manner, the author decided to finish the book with three chapters dedicated to women's organisations, and the fight for hope and human rights.

Throughout the peace process, certain crucial names come to light. Names that have precipitately gone down in history such as Bobby Sands, who died in hunger strike,³ or the assassinations of two human rights lawyers.

Ten years (1989-1999) stand in between the assassinations of Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson, killed by loyalist paramilitary groups. Both embarked on a fight against the abuses perpetrated in Northern Ireland.

Several testimonies compiled in *Las Hijas de Erin* indicate the strange circumstances surrounding the death of Pat Finucane, one of the most active

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace, approved by General Assembly resolution 39/11 of 12 November 1984, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/peace.htm>. See also *Declaración de Luarca sobre el Derecho Humano a la Paz*, Asociación Española para el Desarrollo y la Aplicación del Derecho Internacional de los Derechos Humanos (AEDIDH), <http://www.seipaz.org/documentos/DeclaracionLuarca.pdf>

³ Bobby Sands died in prison, in May 1981, after a two-month hunger strike in protest against the ill-treatment of prisoners. The *Prevention on Terrorism Act* gave these prisoners common prisoner status, with its pertaining consequences. After Sands, ten more nationalist detainees, known as the 'blanketmen', died; see BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/5/newsid_2728000/2728309.stm

Northern Irish lawyers before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Curiously, the case of his death was brought before this very Court, and resolved in July 2003.⁴

This represented a key moment in the Northern Irish conflict. Thereafter, the IRA and Sinn Féin were extraordinarily strengthened. This is due to several reasons, including the different resolutions adopted by the British government (Prevention on Terrorism Act and Imprisonment without Trial Act of 1971) and the lack of full guarantees of prisoners' rights against humiliation, torture or strip-searching. Generally these methods were used to induce self incrimination.

The ECHR has ruled against the United Kingdom on several occasions regarding the Northern Ireland conflict,⁵ including four rulings published by the Court on 4 May 2001: Hugh Jordan; McKerr; Kelly and others; and Shanaghan. In a public document, released on the same day, Amnesty International asserted that, 'There are over a dozen inquests into disputed killings pending in Northern Ireland, using the same procedures which the court has found violates the European Convention on Human Rights'.⁶

Since the Belfast Peace Agreement, after almost a decade of peace efforts and recent developments, reflection on the path covered gains great importance. Calamati rightly recovers the long peace process and evidences the need for taking into account – when a solution finally seems possible – the efforts made and the suffering caused. Peace is not without sacrifice; and it should thus be remembered.

The year 2007 seems to be of great importance to the Northern Irish conflict. Sinn Féin is consolidating its democratic profile and has recently acknowledged, for the first time in its history, the British police and courts. This represents one of the largest steps towards a non-violent solution. This unilateral decision opens the door to parliamentary elections scheduled for 7 March.

Despite these advances, it must be taken into account that not all paramilitary groups have ceased violence. Even though violence has decreased at a global level, the expected decommission of weapons by certain unionist groups such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) or the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) has been delayed. Similarly, other republican organisations are also active – the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA) and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA).⁷

Las Hijas de Erin, no doubt intentionally, lacks one point of view. The book's credibility is questioned, for example, by the lack of references to IRA attacks, which were responsible for sixty percent of the deaths in the Northern Irish conflict.

⁴ Judgement was not issued until 1 July 2003 when the Court ruled in favour of the plaintiff, acknowledging a violation of the procedural obligation of the British government to protect the right to life imposed by Article 2 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; see European Court of Human Rights, [Chamber Judgment in the Case of Finucane v. The United Kingdom \(application 29178/95\)](#), press release, 1 July 2003. The Finucane family, unhappy with the ruling, continued to demand a public inquiry from the British government, which only recently acceded, but under the *2005 Inquiries Act*. According to the family and the Council of Europe, this is not the appropriate way to carry it out given that it is 'susceptible to an intrusion by the authorities in the process', and there is a need for the entire community to carry out a 'complete, independent, public and legal inquiry into the Finucane killing'; see [Joint Statement from Amnesty International, British Irish Rights Watch, the Committee on the Administration of Justice and Human Rights First](#).

⁵ See Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, UK cases decided by the European Court of Human Rights since 1995 in relation to Northern Ireland, http://www.nihrc.org/index.php?page=subresources&category_id=23&from=1&resources_id=39&search_content=

⁶ See Amnesty International, [United Kingdom: Landmark judgments on killings in Northern Ireland](#), 4 May 2001.

⁷ See Thirteenth Report of the Northern Ireland Independent Monitoring Commission, <http://www.independentmonitoringcommission.org/documents/uploads/Thirteenth%20Report.pdf>

Both communities still have much to do; it cannot be forgotten that less than one year ago Denis Donaldson was killed (April 2006), and neither has responsibility been claimed nor blame assigned.

Nevertheless, recovering the role of women in a society immersed in a post conflict situation is the greatest feature of this book. Women's social mediating function and its significance as an essential motor of the smallest society groups or communities - starting with family - must not go unnoticed.

In this case, one of the differentiating factors of the attitudes of women has been the search for a common ground to bring both communities together. Subsequently, the different Northern Irish social strata have followed the same path. Accustomed to political differences, nowadays it seems difficult to base a solution to any conflict on these premises. The initial conflict resolution phase is always tumultuous, but in Ulster the need that primarily stems from identifying and strengthening common objectives has been demonstrated. Perhaps, the solution does not consist in identifying differences and then making them disappear, but in finding the values and objectives that unite peoples.

The instruments that can be used in crisis situations are not reduced to merely a social group's pressure power. International courts must play their corresponding role while the conflict is still alive and, clearly, also once it finishes. In Northern Ireland, the pressure exerted by the ECHR has had positive results, in its vigilance of the different actors once the peace process was under way. Repercussions of its rulings may lead to an active international influence and, hence, the ECHR would turn into an ideal instrument for governments to redirect their policies. Since 2000, the European Convention on Human Rights is embedded into British law, implying that British citizens can directly address national courts to demand its compliance.

The court is currently involved in 90,000 cases, and some say 'the court is becoming a victim of its own success'.⁸ The need for the ECHR to issue judgement (the ruling of *Finucane vs. the United Kingdom* was issued in 2003, after 15 years) is as important as the need for such rulings to be effective and have real consequences. Otherwise, international organisations would be obliged to take the adequate measures to put pressure on governments to fulfil the courts' indications.

On the other hand, the massive overflow of open cases in such court is striking. In Europe, the world's vanguard in this aspect, reports of violations of fundamental rights and essential liberties multiply.

After several decades of violence, Northern Ireland climbs the ladder of peace one step at a time. Many conflicts are still active or latent. No-one is exempt; Europe is not different from other parts of the world.

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⁸ Interview, 'Jean-Paul Costa talks about his new job as President of the European Court of Human Rights', *Euronews*, 26 January 2007, <http://www.euronews.net/index.php?page=interview&article=403227&lng=1>