WOMEN'S POLITICAL VISUALISATION OF POST-CONFLICT BELFAST: COMMUNITY-LED PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEANS OF HIGHLIGHTING SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES AFFECTING INTERFACE AREAS OF THE CITY

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Abstract

In late 2014, a group of women who live in the predominantly Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist Tigers Bay and a community worker from the predominantly Catholic-Nationalist-Republican New Lodge interface areas of North Belfast worked with each other to offer visual representations of their localities as a means of highlighting socio-economic issues affecting both regions of the post-conflict city. This visualisation took the form of a photobook 'Women's Vision from Across the Barricades' (2015) containing images and text taken and co-edited by the participants.

The contemporary post-conflict context represents a wider socio-political culture of promoting external investment and economic growth in the city of Belfast, often represented by the redevelopment of the Titanic Quarter; yet little direct dividends have been felt or experienced by communities most affected by the conflict (Doyle and McAreavey 2014; Rallings 2014). O'Dowd and Komarova (2013, 528) suggest that Belfast is often viewed as an exemplar 'contested city'. In addition, they outline two additional emergent ideological framings of the city: the 'new capitalist' (ibid., 529) and 'shared city' narratives (ibid., 536). This article will consider this project in relation to these narratives. It will argue that the women's visual engagement with their locality demonstrates that gendered political memory remains embedded within the physical structures of interface areas of the city. Overall, it will argue that this project is an example of grassroots activism led by women that contributes to the ongoing process of reconciliation by generating shared socio-economic objectives alongside challenging the exclusion of women from local power structures.

KEYWORDS: *Northern Ireland, Belfast, post-conflict, women, gender, peacebuilding, collaborative, participatory photography*

Introduction and context

In late 2014, a group of women who live in the predominantly Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist Tigers Bay and a community worker from the predominantly Catholic-Nationalist-Republican New Lodge interface areas of North Belfast worked with each other to offer visual representations of their localities as a means of highlighting political issues affecting both regions of the post-conflict city. This visualisation took the form of a photobook 'Women's Vision from Across the Barricades', published and publicly launched at Duncairn Centre for Culture and Arts in North Belfast in October 2015, containing images and text taken and co-edited by the participants. The women aimed to use the photobook as a visual accompaniment to their existing community activism. They also intended to use it as an additional lobbying tool in order to highlight urgent socio-economic issues they felt were being overlooked and neglected by local power structures. They also wanted to challenge their lack of inclusion in decision-making on issues such as housing and employment relevant to their localities. To that end, the photobook finished with a set of 'demands' or objectives centred around key socio-economic issues i.e. barricades, housing, employment, women-centred services and meaningful community consultation.

The project emerged out a meeting between myself (a practice-led researcher at Ulster University) and Eileen Weir, (Good Relations Coordinator at Shankill Women's Centre and founder of the Greater North Belfast Women's Network) at a conference on the role of women in peacebuilding. Shankill Women's Centre is a key voluntary organisation, established by a group of women in 1987 that offers educational and training opportunities to women in the Shankill area and beyond. One of its programmes, Greater North Belfast Women's Network (GNBWG) aims to foster cross-community collaboration between women's groups in that region. Eileen suggested working with one such group as a means of highlighting 'issues affecting their area.' The group was Lower North Belfast Women's Group (LNBWG), comprised of women who live in Tigers Bay, who also participate in the Greater North Belfast Women's Network. The 6 women, mostly in their 30s with young families, had a vested interest in community development and were already actively organising community events and signposting relevant services to local residents. Alongside LNBWG, Margaret Valente of Star Neighbourhood Centre in New Lodge, also a contributor to the network, participated in the project both as a photographer and co-facilitator. The women viewed the visual elements that I could bring to their work as an additional means of highlighting and making visible, experiences and socio-economic issues still present in interface areas of post-conflict Belfast that were being subsumed under new capitalist and neo-liberal re-framings of the city (Baker and McLaughlin 2010; O'Dowd and Komarova 2013). The current context of post-conflict Belfast represents a wider political culture of promoting external investment and economic growth in Northern Ireland, often represented by the redevelopment of the Titanic Quarter; yet little direct dividends have been felt or experienced by communities most affected by the conflict (Doyle and McAreavey 2014; Rallings 2014; O'Dowd and Komarova 2013; Baker and McLaughlin

2010; NISRA 2017). Murtagh and Keaveney (2006, 187–188) argue that this 'twin-speed economy has produced an increasingly bifurcated place, where new layers of disadvantage are placed over old patterns of sectarian enmity and political fatalism' and that 'the other Belfast is stratified by poverty, ethno-religious segregation and fear and is more spatially fixed in the sink estates of the inner and outer city'. Tigers Bay and New Lodge are two areas within North Belfast marked out as deprived wards that have experienced, and continue to experience, high levels of poverty, violence and social exclusion' (Fay et al. 1999; NISRA 2017). Both run parallel to Duncairn Gardens, a main thoroughfare that separates each region, with so-called peacewalls or gated entries providing access between the two.

Within this context, grassroots women's movements developed in response to the political, social, economic, ethno-national and gendered challenges posed by the conflict, and in relation to ongoing societal issues pertinent to women such as pay equality, access to education and employment and childcare. Challenges particular to post-conflict societies include wider structural complexities that impede and restrict the role of women, and in particular, the tendency to render them invisible either by reducing their contribution to the conflict or by limiting their role in addressing it. As Stapleton and Wilson (2014, 2073) suggest:

In contexts of ethno-national conflict, women are typically positioned as victims, as peacemakers or as supporting players. These positions reflect normatively gendered categories and characteristics. Crucially, they also undermine the notion of women as active participants within the conflict situation. Hence women's engagement in wars and other conflicts is often invisible to external observers.

At a more localised level, Ward (2013, para. 1) suggests that women in Northern Ireland have been excluded and silenced not only in relation to their role in the conflict, but also in their actual and potential contribution to 'support(ing) the transition out of conflict'. As Ashe (2009, 311) points out, 'given women's under-representation in formal political arenas in Northern Ireland (…), it is important that theorists chart their involvement at the level of civil society organisations and make women's political and communal agency visible'. This article redresses this invisibility by making visible, literally and figuratively, the activity and agency of women who are engaged in dealing with the on-going legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland.

Visual research process and collaborative protocols
In terms of methodology, the project adopted a collaborative approach, adapted from my previous work on audiovisual projects that included contrasting and competing trauma narratives and interpretations of contested sites in the same filmic and exhibitive spaces (Mairs Dyer, 2014; Mairs Dyer, 2013; Mairs, 2013; Mairs and McLaughlin, 2012). Drawing upon this and similar research, which confirms that collaborative

protocols can be effective when exhibiting and (re)presenting contrasting narratives in post-conflict contexts (McLaughlin, 2010; Lundy and McGovern, 2006; Healing through Remembering, 2005); from the outset, this project was premised on the notion of shared ownership of both the individual photographic work and the final outcome, which was in this case, a photobook. In addition, each individual and participating group maintained the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Whilst this approach is not without limitations (Mairs Dyer 2013; Hackett and Rolston 2009; Lundy and McGovern 2006), it provides participants with 'a sense of safety and control and ha(s) the effect of maintaining engagement' (Mairs Dyer 2013, 239).

Active participation in the creative process of photography fostered a sense of empowerment amongst the participants. It ensured the development and consolidation of new skills and provided a creative means of expression and representation. In a follow-up feedback session with project participants held in October 2019, one participant stated, 'I think the fact (we) were taught how to take photographs was something that was new, and it was that type of artistic outcome to it. It wasn't just about talking about what (we) wanted sorted. (We) actually went out and took photographs of what it was that (we) were unhappy about. It was about (…) our social expression through photographs because (we) were unable (…) to get around the table to voice these and that's why the book really came about.'

Gendered political revisualisation
  The overall title chosen by the group for the photobook 'Women's Vision from Across the Barricades', perhaps at once suggests the dominance of the contested city narrative, with the literal 'eyeing each other from across public space' (O'Dowd and Komarova 2013, 537) and a sense of looking 'at' 'the other,' and 'this is how we/you look from here'. It is a vision that is at once obstructed and mediated by physical, social and economic barriers. The domination of the physical presence of barricades is exemplified by the images taken and selected for inclusion.

  The text in the photobook that accompanies Figure 1 reads:

'This is the only gate monitored by a surveillance camera used to go in and out of Tigers Bay. It opens at 7am and closes at 5.30pm. This means that local residents have to walk an extra half-mile to use shops after the gates close. With consultation between statutory bodies and local residents, we may be able to achieve extended opening hours and improve security.'

  Modifiers used to describe the gate such as 'monitored', 'surveillance', 'have to' and 'security', express limitation and restriction, which is embodied by the physicality of the environment, which acts as a:

'Powerful means of engendering strategic control. It lends the area an air of uncanniness; it is clear that it is highly securitized, but it is unclear to what extent and to what end (…) reinforcing the position of power held by the unidentified surveillor [sic]. This also enhances the sense of deterritorialization—the surveillor [sic] is anonymous, distant, and operates ''from above'' and outside the site in question. (…) The presence of (surveillance) (…) engenders a pervasive sense of impending disorder (and its punishment). The very structures and functions of these mechanisms act as artefacts of past and future (or predicted) violence (Mitchell and Kelly 2011, 318).

The image and text combine to demonstrate that such structures communicate to residents that they are unpredictable and therefore subject to control, containment and surveillance. This sense of threat emanates not only from inter and intra-community relations, but also from within the physicality of the city environment.

Fig. 1

Socio-economic exclusion, with a sense of looking out towards a wider city context and their respective distance from, and perception of, it, is most pertinently represented by the image selected for the cover of the photobook:

Figure 2 shows Tigers Bay in the foreground with the iconic structures of Harland and Woolf shipyard cranes and the Titanic building in the newly established quarter of the same name in the background. Harland and Woolf could be said to represent Northern Ireland's industrial past, where ship manufacturing was the cornerstone of secure employment, particularly for Protestant men. This vision of the old Belfast, with

its emphasis on production, dependable jobs for the working-classes, sits beside new capitalist Belfast, and its promise of the city's integration into globalised structures of international tourism and the emergent service industry. Its positioning in the background as a slightly blurred, almost ethereal chimera highlights its physical proximity, yet simultaneous distance. It is a visualisation of Murtagh and Keaveney's (2006, 187) 'bifurcated' city alongside the:

'Conceptual and practical differentiation of the city centre from the peripheral inner-city residential areas (that) treats these working-class areas as scapegoats, as though they are vessels in which the division and sectarianism that pervades most of Northern Irish society can (and should) be contained. In so doing, policy labels 'interface' areas and characterises them as focal points for hostile interactions, entrenching this term in the lexicon. This attitude advocates a protectionist stance towards the city centre, without recognising that it is a space like any other— socially constructed, fluid and vulnerable to contestation' (Rallings 2014, 437).

In the follow-up event held with project participants in October 2019, one participant stated the photobook played an essential role in highlighting, 'where money seems to be invested in tourism and nothing is really being invested that much within the communities that actually bore the brunt of the conflict.' Another stated, 'There's no transformation. There's no benefit for us.' Another confirmed that 'what (the book) highlights is the lack of transformation in Northern Ireland in certain areas. (…) Other

Fig. 2

places have been transformed but look what we're (…) living in.' Another stated 'you can see the big buildings (…) in the mist (but) this is unobtainable from Tigers Bay and New Lodge. It's not even a mile away when you're looking across the loch.' A further participant stated, 'I think (the photobook) showed what our areas were like. We showed how near Titanic Quarter was and the jobs and (drew attention to the urgent need for) women's services and youth services.'

Ongoing social discontent and the absence of a sense direct benefit from the purported prosperity of the post-conflict era is perhaps most apparent in images that highlight the use of public space in Tigers Bay:

Fig 3

Fig 4

Accompanying text here reads, 'houses were pulled down from the area of Tigers Bay over 10 years ago with promise of new houses going up. This is a disused space that could be used for social housing.' Figure 4 reads, 'From April onwards each year this derelict area is used a bonfire site.'

Since the publication of the photobook, the site has now been re-purposed for social housing. At the follow-up event a participant stated, 'we don't have a bonfire site in Tigers Bay. There's nowhere to have it. But it's better because we're getting housing. (…) They're in the process of building twelve three-bedroom and eight two-bedroom (houses).' Whilst it cannot be claimed that this was a direct result of the publication of the photobook, what is apparent is that the act of its production created a narrative of shared community objectives that contributed to achieving their intended outcomes. In addition, as outlined earlier, there is a distinct tendency towards rendering women's contribution to the conflict and its resolution invisible. This is reinforced by the demarcation of specific regions of the city as areas of male domination and control. Visual modes of commemoration, in particular plaques and murals, tend to focus on male agency and activity. The section of the photobook entitled 'public space and commemoration' represents the city space as one of gendered iconography and

symbolism:

Fig 5

Fig 6

Fig 7

   Figure 5 reads, 'this memorial depicts the 1941 Second World War Belfast Blitz. Our areas are more deprived now than they were back then.' The mural itself emphasises male activity and class structures, showing a milkman carrying out his duties amidst the material destruction of the city alongside male soldiers listening benignly to a woman in the supportive, placating and diverting role of playing the piano. Similarly, figure 6 shows how New Lodge's iconisation of Bobby Sands, is framed and positioned, as the accompanying text confirms, on top of the Barrack Flats in New Lodge so that his image 'can be seen across the city' in order to 'highlight issues within the nationalist community such as the hunger strikes in the early 1980s.' These images highlight the visual dominance of male narratives and how 'spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, (…) reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood' (Massey 1994, 179).

Figure 7, with its depiction of a children's playpark demarcated as an area of paramilitarised masculine unionist control in Tigers Bay, emphasises the limitation, reduction and recurring public invisibility of women's contribution to the conflict and engagement with its consequences. This becomes emblematic of 'gendered national symbolism' (Ward 2006, 148) that 'works to convey the sorts of roles suitable for men and women to engage in the national project, and in unionist-nationalist discourse there is a lack of positive female imagery'. This is counter to the reality that:

'Throughout the Troubles, both unionist and nationalist women engaged in a range of conflict-related activities, including paramilitary involvement, street protests and sectarianism towards members of the 'other' community (…). Indeed (…) the strength of communal identifications/ differences has been a key impediment to the development of a unified women's movement in NI' (Ashe 2011, 2014).

Since the publication of the photobook, paramilitary flags are no longer flown around the playpark, or around Tigers Bay in general. A participant reflected on how, 'we (had) paramilitary flags at either end (of the playpark) now there's no UDA flags.' Another participant confirmed that, 'somebody somewhere looked at (the photobook) and said, "Right ok, this is a place where kids is going to be. (…)". The community sort of took a bit of a stand there.' The transformation of the area has been such that one participant stated, 'if you were to drive around Tigers Bay now, you'd be lucky if you even see a paramilitary flag.' Another stated, 'when the community takes a hold of something like that (…) they -re-claim (it).' Whilst this does not suggest that this alone has had an impact on paramilitarism in this region of the city as this remains an ongoing and significant issue (Hourigan et al., 2017), it does, however, suggest that when women's perspectives are made more visible, they begin to challenge the dominance of male narratives of the conflict that permeate the visual iconography and spatial ownership of their localities.

Conclusion

This visualisation could be viewed as re-imaging, re-establishing and perhaps consolidating the narrative of the contested city, or as O'Dowd and Komarova (2013, 528) suggest, could be said to embody an 'exemplar' approach (that) risks obscuring the dimensions of urban life that Belfast shares with (…) cities not divided on ethno-national grounds'; however, this issue-based approach neither denies nor ignores ongoing ethno-national segregation and division, but instead, acknowledges and highlights it. It demonstrates and uncovers the complexities and contradictions of a society that is emerging from conflict, yet the everyday lived experience of women living in interface areas remains one that is dominated by segregation, surveillance and distinct areas of politicised and gendered space.

  Whilst this project highlights the risks of ongoing socio-economic exclusion, its collaborative, participatory methodology demonstrates a model of cross-community activism led by women. The group's intention to use the photobook as an additional tool in lobbying local political representatives 'encourage(s) new forms of grassroots place-making' (O'Dowd and Komarova 2013, 256) that moves beyond the physical demarcations of politicised space. A participant confirmed that, 'every politician in North Belfast got that book' including Northern Ireland's First Minister Arlene Foster. The participant stated, 'I gave it to her; and I put "trust women" on the front of it. I was meaning (…) (that she should) trust the women that (made) this book.' This reinforces that whilst 'Northern Irish women have been consistently underrepresented within the political sphere (…) women from both traditions (are) active in the informal arenas of voluntary activism, peacebuilding and cross- community engagement' (Stapleton and Wilson 2014, 2074). Such methods of community- led cooperative engagement generate what Gizeli (2011, 524) terms a form of 'social capital' whereby 'resources embedded in social structures (…) can be mobilised towards a purposive collective action'. As one participant stated, 'I think (…) that the book actually said, "this is what people are saying. (…) This is something that has been published. These are voices that we haven't heard before because they're not round the table and we need to do something about it."' The production of the photobook therefore directly contributed to increasing the women's public access to, and participation in, the wider public sphere and challenged their exclusion from local power structures. In speaking about the marginalisation of women's voices one participant stated '(they) probably thought because we were below (them) and that we didn't have a right to do something like that.' One participant confirmed that this type of active, visible, creative participation challenges the silencing of 'ordinary women who are trying to improve their community who (don't) have their voices heard. I believe that we achieved that as a collective by doing that book because they can't silence that book.'

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