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Rethinking Women's Struggles in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland

Simona Sharoni

Introduction

According to conventional wisdom, political conflict inevitably has negative implications for the lives of women, while the signing of peace agreements always carries with it positive ramifications. This chapter[1] critically examines this proposition in relation to central themes in the growing body of literature on women and conflict and through particular examples from the lives and struggles of women in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland. A critical review of common trends in feminist literature on gender and political conflict and a brief history of the major turning points in each conflict set the stage for a comparative analysis of women's struggles in both contexts. More specifically, I examine carefully the lives and struggles of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the Palestinian uprising known as the *intifada*, which began in 1987 and lasted roughly until 1998, and to women in nationalist West Belfast at the height of the 'troubles' (1969-81). I conclude with a preliminary discussion of the general lessons to be drawn from this analysis, about women's activism amidst armed conflicts and after they are proclaimed resolved.

Feminist theorizing on gender and political conflict

The body of literature on gender, war, and peace in general and on women and political violence in particular has grown significantly in the past decade. Furthermore, debate of these issues has spilled over beyond the narrow confines of ivory towers to policy think tanks and the mainstream media. But despite the explosion of literature and the proliferation of public debates on these issues, a few trends dominate, leaving many assumptions about the relationship between gender and political conflict largely unchallenged.

The most common trend in the literature on political conflict involves the exclusion of women and gender issues from the arena of international politics. This exclusion has often been explained through reference to the public-private dichotomy. In this dichotomy, the public sphere, where politics takes place, is deemed a masculine domain, while women are relegated to the private sphere and assigned sole responsibility for matters involving the home and family (Elshtain 1981). While the public-private dichotomy was originally invoked to challenge women's exclusion, its uncritical use across cultures and contexts may reinforce the view that women have no power or political agency and that they are totally dependent on existing social and political structures. As Amal Rassam argues, 'implicit in this dichotomy of public/male, private/female is the assumption that power, viewed as belonging to the public-political domain, is a male monopoly and that women, confined to the domestic sphere, are powerless' (in Singerman 1994: 180).

This assumption is evident in the prevalent view of women as victims of conflict, which tends to overlook, explicitly or implicitly, women's power and agency. Along the same lines, analyses of women's political involvement often fail to take into account changes in patterns of women's political inclusion and exclusion during times of conflict and as conflicts move toward resolution. A clear bias exists in the literature against women's struggles for gender equality within a national liberation movement. National liberation movements have been portrayed as the least hospitable places for women, despite the fact that women in national liberation movements - compared to women in the military or in state politics - seem to have had more space to raise questions about gender inequalities. The common argument is that national liberation movements use women in the course of the struggle but tend to overlook their contribution to the revolution and embrace conventional conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations once the struggle is over (Yuval-Davis 1997, YuvalDavis and Anthias 1989). This argument overlooks women's agency and their ability strategically to use their involvement in the national struggle to safeguard their gains during and after the revolution (Jayawardena 1986, West 1997. See also Ibanez, this volume).

Another, somewhat related, assumption is that women's struggles are often set back when political conflicts escalate. A careful examination of particular examples of women's struggles amidst international conflict challenges this assumption by pointing out that conflicts do not always have negative implications for women. In fact, in some situations, conflict may be a potential springboard for women's emancipation. As Rosemary Ridd points out, 'when a community is involved in open conflict and all resources are directed towards an external threat.., there is likely to be some fluidity in social ordering' (Ridd and Calaway 1987: 3). This fluidity often includes changes in gender roles and relations introduced primarily through women's involvement in community and political activism and men's preoccupation with the overt political conflict.

In sum, a critical examination of the assumptions that have informed the extensive body of literature on gender and political conflict underscores the need for more nuanced, context-specific studies on this topic. Such studies will highlight women's agency and creative ways of coping with political change and call into question the stereotypical portrayal of women as mere victims of conflict.

Political conflicts in comparative perspective

The Palestine-Israel conflict and the conflict over the North of Ireland have inspired large volumes of scholarly work, and more recently several comparative accounts as well (Gilommee and Gagiano 1990). This section provides a cursory background to the conflicts and lays out the rationale for my comparative exploration.

The terminology used to describe these conflicts is often contested, as well as laced with implicit if not explicit political innuendo. The terms 'Palestinians' and 'Israelis' are presently the most common ones used to address the conflict in both scholarly and media accounts. In this chapter, when the term 'Palestinians' is used, it often refers to people who live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, some in areas controlled (solely or partially) by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and others still living under Israeli military occupation. As for the term 'Israelis', its usage is largely misleading, as one-sixth of Israel's population consists of Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship (Lustick 1980, Rouhana 1989). The term 'Israeli Jews', which I use in this chapter, more accurately describes this party to the conflict.

The discussion of terminology becomes slightly more complex in the North of Ireland. Most media accounts and a sizeable portion of the scholarly literature uses the apparently denominational terms 'Protestants' and 'Catholics' to describe the conflict, creating the impression that the conflict has its origins in religion. Other scholars prefer the terms 'Unionists' and 'Nationalists', which are political and point to the colonial roots of the conflict. These terms capture the political dimensions of the struggle in Ireland since the turn of the century. This struggle has been between Unionists, who seek to maintain the union with England (mostly Protestants) and Nationalists, who identify with Irish nationalism (mostly Catholics) and have sought to liberate Ireland from British colonialism. The terms 'Unionists' and 'Nationalists' are sometimes used interchangeably with the terms 'Loyalists' and 'Republicans', which reflect the preferred political solutions of the two collectivities in the North of Ireland. While most Unionists wish to remain loyal to the British Crown, most Nationalists identify with and seek to be part of the Republic of Ireland. Some writers use the terms 'Loyalists' and 'Republicans' to refer to the paramilitaries in both communities (Taylor 1997, 1999). In this chapter I will use mostly the terms 'Unionists' and 'Nationalists' and 'Loyalists' and 'Republicans'.

The reasons behind the contested terminology become clear upon examination of key dimensions of these conflicts. There are two interrelated patterns of similarity between them, both of which lend themselves to a gender-sensitive analysis:

1. a history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles;
2. a clear asymmetry in power relations between the parties to the conflict.

Colonial legacies

It is impossible to understand the dynamics of these conflicts without taking into account the impact of British colonialism on their histories. The British arrived in Palestine in late 1917, ending the Ottoman rule over the area. Even prior to their occupation, the British were simultaneously making promises regarding the future of Palestine to both Palestinian and Zionist leaders (Ciment 1997, Gerner 1994). These competing promises fuelled tensions between the Zionist settlers and indigenous Palestinian population and set the stage for direct confrontations between the emerging Jewish and Palestinian nationalist movements. The 1947 United Nations (UN) Partition Plan, which called for the creation of a Jewish state and an Arab state in Palestine, indicated that the British mandate over Palestine was to end on 15 May 1948. With some reservations, the Zionists endorsed the proposal, which gave them 57 per cent of Palestine, including the fertile coastal region. Palestinians, however, viewed this proposal as fundamentally flawed and unjust, since at the time Jews represented only about 33 per cent of the population and owned only 7 per cent of the land. Indeed, estimates by the UN suggest that the division of territory spelled out in the 1947 partition plan would have given the Jewish state economic revenues three times greater than the Palestinian state (Sharoni and Abu-Nimer 2000).

On 29 November 1947, the UN General Assembly voted in favour of this particular plan. The UN vote on partition sparked an unprecedented wave of violence, which escalated into a full-fledged war following the establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 (Gerner 1994). In the course of the war, the Palestinian community was virtually destroyed. Approximately 780,000 Palestinians became refugees as a direct result of Israel's establishment. Some Palestinians fled while others were driven out by force, and 418 Arab villages were destroyed

and/or depopulated (Morris 1988; 1990). The war ended with the establishment of Israel on roughly 77 per cent of the total area of Palestine. The remaining 23 per cent was divided between Jordan, who gained control over the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Egypt, who took on the administration of the Gaza Strip (Muslih 1992).

The other colonial dimension of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict involves a critical examination of Zionism as an example of settler colonialism. According to Palestinian historians and a handful of critical scholars, the implementation of the Zionist project in Palestine is reminiscent of other settler-colonial projects around the world (Finkelstein 1995, Khalidi 1971, Lustick 1993). In fact, Zionism does share some of the characteristics of the settler-colonial project in the North of Ireland, the main difference involving the fact that 'Northern Ireland' is still an actual colony of 'Great Britain'.

There are several turning points that have shaped the particular nature of British colonialism in Ireland (and later in the North of Ireland), and attempts to resist it. The emergence of Irish Nationalism in the late eighteenth century and the Easter Rising of 1916 shared many of the characteristics of anti-colonial struggles in other parts of the world. Another major turning point came in 1920, with the introduction of the Government of Ireland Act, which established separate administrations for the North and South of Ireland, both subservient to the British Crown. This partition plan was not welcome in the South, where Nationalists were struggling to create an independent Irish republic that would encompass the entire island (Bardon 1992). The result was a two-year national liberation struggle conducted against the British and culminating in a 1922 treaty between Dublin and London. The treaty accepted the general tenets of the 1920 partition plan, but sanctioned the creation of the Irish Free State in the South, including 26 counties. While this arrangement suited the Protestants who constituted a majority in the six counties - 'Northern Ireland' according to the partition plan - it split the Catholic/Nationalist community in the South, triggering a two-year bloody civil war between proponents and opponents of partition. The war ended in 1923 with the victory of those who supported the partition plan (Clayton 1998). The colonial dimension of both conflicts has created and reinforced asymmetries in power relations, and structured inequalities.

Power asymmetries

The conflicts in Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland are often presented as intractable struggles between two collectivities with competing claims over the same territory. This representation obscures the asymmetrical power relations between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians, on the one hand, and Unionists and Nationalists, on the other, both in the past and in the present. An emphasis on power asymmetries is not designed to glorify one party or vilify the other. Rather, it stems from the recognition that a successful resolution of these conflicts depends to a great extent on the close examination of structured inequalities and the ability to devise a framework to transform unequal power relations.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, which affirmed the national aspirations of the Jews, came at the expense of Palestinians, whose desire for self-determination and territorial sovereignty remains largely unfulfilled (Abu-Lughod 1982, Said 1980). Moreover, Israel's military is among the strongest and most sophisticated in the world, owing not least to consistent US backing. The military imbalance between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was seriously challenged only during the *intifada*. This basic power asymmetry is

also readily evident in the Oslo Accords, the process that led to their signing, and their contentious implementation (Guyatt 1998, Usher 1995).

Looking at the conflict in the North of Ireland as asymmetrical in nature reveals a different dimension of the conflict, overlooked by its portrayal as intercommunal or sectarian, characterized by religious and ethnic polarities. Catholics have clearly been the underdog since Partition, suffering from systematic discrimination at the hands of both the British Crown and its Protestant beneficiaries. This discrimination has manifested itself in access to housing, jobs, health and education. In addition, the electoral system in the North was designed to ensure the preservation of the status quo (Bew *et al*. 1996). The persistence of discriminatory policies and practices in the North of Ireland prompted the emergence of the civil rights movements, which drew its main inspiration from the civil rights movement in the United States. The marches and protests, which started in 1968, were clear attempts to alter, through non-violent means, the power inequalities between Protestants and Catholics in the North (Purdie 1990). The British and Unionist/Loyalist response to the civil rights movement and the decision to call in the British Army in 1969 triggered a serious escalation of inter-communal tensions, marking the beginning of what is often referred to as the 'troubles' (Arthur 1996).

Three decades later, the Good Friday Agreement, signed in April 1998, was expected to put an end to the violent conflict in the North of Ireland, and to address some of the systemic inequities. However, like their Jewish counterparts in Israel the Unionist majority in the North of Ireland does not appear ready at present for power-sharing. From their vantage point, any attempt to change the unequal distribution of power and privilege in the North of Ireland comes at their expense (Shirlow and McGovern 1997, Taylor 1999).

To understand this reaction, one must examine carefully the ways in which the escalation and de-escalation of political conflicts shapes people's identities and responses to change, both individually and collectively. The remainder of this chapter offers such an examination by focusing on women's ways of coping with political conflict and its aftermath both in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland.

Women as key political actors

Political conflict has uneven effects for different people within different communities. A comparative analysis of the coping mechanisms utilized by Nationalist women in predominantly Catholic West Belfast and by Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip offers numerous insights regarding the potential and pitfalls of women's organizing amidst political conflict.

For Palestinian women, the long history of political involvement and organizing at community level produced the basis upon which responses to both the hardship and the opportunities of the *intifada* were predicated. The *intifada* provided women who had participated in literacy programmes and skill-training courses operated by the women's committees with both an opportunity and an excuse to join the women's movement and to put what they had learned to use. The experience, social legitimacy and institutional base of the women's committees enabled mass participation of women in the *intifada*. During its first year, the large-scale political mobilization of Palestinian women was not perceived as a challenge to social stability but rather as a necessary and valuable contribution to the national struggle (Jad 1990, Sabbagh 1998, Sharoni 1995, Strum 1992).

Similar opportunities emerged for women in the North of Ireland during the early years of the troubles. The Falls Road curfew, declared by the British Army in July 1970, and internment without trial, which the government of Northern Ireland introduced in August 1971, triggered a massive mobilization of women, primarily within Catholic/ Nationalist communities. Women challenged the curfew, organized on their own streets to provide protection against military harassment and arrests and, with the introduction of internment, women replaced men in vital community roles. What started as local initiatives of unorganized women developed into large campaigns and triggered the establishment of new women's organizations. Monica McWilliams uses the term' accidental activism' to describe Irish women's responses during this period. According to McWilliams, accidental activism is 'born of immediate experience of social injustice, rather than as a consequence of a pre-existing ideological belief'. As a result, 'women who previously did not see themselves as in any way political became advocates and agents for social change' (McWilliams 1995: 13-15).

There are striking similarities between the political mobilization of Palestinian women during the early stages of the *intifada* and the organizing of Nationalist women in the North of Ireland at the beginning of the troubles. Most writings on women's organizing during the early years of both processes underscore the fact that the magnitude of women's mobilization was both a catalyst and a result of the general climate of change. As different constituencies tried to adjust to the new reality introduced by largely unanticipated political changes, there was some fluidity in social relations and roles, with women and youth gaining more visibility and respect for their contribution to the national struggle. Describing the changes in Palestinian women's roles during the first years of the *intifada*, Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson argue that the community's struggle to survive played a major role in changing people's views concerning women's political activism. Because women made themselves indispensable in their communities at a time 'when conditions were creating new and pressing needs', most people did not view their gender as a liability but rather as an asset (Giacaman and Johnson 1989: 157).

Women's greater political involvement and its acceptance by the communities were no doubt related, at least in part, to the changes in men's roles as the political crisis escalated. With men absent from most households, women felt that they had a legitimate excuse to get involved in the political struggle. Their participation was viewed as a sign of loyalty both to the men in their families and the larger collectivity. Giacaman and Johnson note in particular the Palestinian community's acceptance of the participation of unmarried women in mixed-gender settings, whether demonstrations or neighbourhood committees. They also point out that in most cases the *intifada* created a context that eased family restrictions on the movement of women and broadened the range of legitimate roles they could assume. Most families were proud of this new political activism (Giacaman and Johnson 1989: 161).

Another similarity, which may partly explain the relative space Palestinian and Irish nationalist women experienced during the periods discussed here, involves the subversive use of conventional conceptions of womanhood and femininity as a secret weapon in the struggle. In the North of Ireland, as in Palestine, there was a general belief that women were more protected than men, especially because the British and Israeli forces deemed them less suspect than their male counterparts. Thus, as in other national liberation struggles, women took to the streets, organized protests, engaged in direct confrontations with Israeli or British soldiers, transported ammunition, carried important messages, and got involved in the armed struggle (Aretxaga 1997; Morgan 1995; Rooney 1995, 1996; Ward 1995).

In both Palestine and the North of Ireland, however, women's political involvement began with their attempts to protect their homes, families and communities rather than with a conscious attempt to move beyond the confines of the private sphere into the broader political arena. '[A]lthough it is often asserted that women's traditional domestic role in the family is an obstacle to public political action, that the world of the home and the world of the polity are sealed off from one another, these barriers seem to have become permeable for Palestinian women during the uprising' (Giacaman and Johnson 1989: 162). In the context of Northern Ireland, Begonia Aretxaga points out that 'internment and the widespread raids of people's homes blurred the boundaries between household and communal space and at certain moments practically erased them' (Aretxaga 1997: 69). This boundary erasure has had direct implications for the transformation of gender identities and roles in both contexts.

Womanhood and femininity redefined: political activism as a transformative experience

Apart from exposing the inseparability of the private and public spheres and their gendered nature, women's political mobilization in both Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland had great implications for their own personal and political development. The political crisis provided a context for an intense consciousness-raising experience. In the North of Ireland, Aretxaga points out, 'the hardship of coping alone with family needs amid great poverty and increasing militarization created new ties of solidarity among women and contributed to the development of a new sense of independence and self-identity' (Aretxaga 1997: 75). Activists' statements such as the following support this analysis:

> I was a typical Irish woman, wife and mother in 1969. I never thought about politics.... I got involved in 1971 with the introduction of internment. My son was interned at the age of sixteen and held for eighteen months. When the hunger strike ended *I felt that I just couldn't go back into the house again. It just wasn't enough for me.* I was too aware of the social problems in the community. (Aretxaga 1997: 54, emphasis added)

This statement both reaffirms and challenges the private-public divide. On the one hand, the narrator describes how she moved beyond the confines of her own home. At the same time, the process she describes is more complex; it was the direct impact of the conflict on her home, family and personal life that politicized her, and she emphasizes the irreversible change that occurred in her life in the course of the struggle. Along the same lines, another woman activist recalls: 'In 1969 ... I became involved in the marches and tenants' associations by seeing what was happening. It made a change for me. *I wasn't a housewife anymore.* I became more aware of injustice, of the interdependence of people for help and of international politics.' (Aretxaga 1997: 54; emphasis added). As in the previous statement, the emphasis on the departure from the role of housewife lends itself to the conventional thesis that conflict propels women to move beyond the confines of the so-called private domain, where they often hold conventional roles as mothers and wives. The legitimacy of this explanation notwithstanding, I read this statement more as a reflection on the new awareness this woman acquired in the course of the struggle alongside other women. Like other women, she seemed eager to look back and reflect on the transformative effects of her political involvement since, as Aretxaga points out, 'the hardship of the early years of the conflict has frequently obscured a great amount of joy women found in what they called a process of learning' (Aretxaga 1997: 79).

The reflection of Irish women on the process of learning triggered during the early years of the troubles resonates with Palestinian women's stories about their personal and political transformation during the *intifada*. The *intifada* provided a context for many women not only to learn more about themselves but also to come in contact with other women, including some who had long been activists in the various women's committees. Another by-product of women's political involvement has been both the confidence and the legitimacy they acquired to participate in political debates. According to Phillippa Strum, 'political discussion is no longer a male preserve. Women routinely join in or initiate conversations about politics, demonstrating that the public sphere has become as much theirs as it is men's' (Strum 1992:92).

Yet Strum wonders whether 'Palestinian men, and most women, look at the emergence of Palestinian women as political leaders and entrepreneurs in the same way that American society looked at women in the work force during and after World War II' (Strum 1992: 141). Her genuine concern for Palestinian women notwithstanding, Strum ignores the learning process that has taken place within Palestinian society during the *intifada*, which resulted in personal and political transformation for many. It is precisely this learning process and many Palestinian women's awareness of the obstacles they may confront once the *intifada* is over, that marks the difference between them and American women during the Second World War. The *intifada* has turned Palestinian women into agents of change, determined not to waste their achievements.

Along the same lines, Aretxaga challenges the prevalent view that women in conflict areas who are propelled to become politically involved by a crisis tend not to be aware of gender issues and discrimination. She insists that

> women in Northern Ireland were not unaware of gender hierarchy; it was simply taken for granted. Their involvement in popular resistance led women, however, to an increased appreciation of the political character of gender inequality. That is, gender relations came to appear as susceptible to transformation as were other social relations. (Aretxaga 1997: 78)

The political crises created new spaces and ample opportunities for women to explore the relationship between their positions in the conflict and their social location as women.

Power, privilege, and the dynamics of change

The difference in the space available for women's political mobilization on each side of the political divides in Israel-Palestine and in Northern Ireland is no doubt related to the asymmetric nature of these conflicts. Palestinians and Nationalists/Republicans, clearly the underdogs in these conflicts, have joined national liberation movements, often grounded in revolutionary ideologies. These movements have not only been venues to establish post-revolutionary nations; they have often become sites of struggle in themselves, where women and men fight over whose visions and ideas will constitute the future nation. These internal debates and contestations often include gender issues and relations. Contrary to liberal feminist arguments concerning the irreconcilable nature of feminism and nationalism, women activists within both the Nationalist/Republican movement and the Palestinian national movement sought to link their struggle for national liberation with that for gender equality. This process created space for their increased participation in politics. As Carol Coulter explains:

> not only in Ireland, but throughout the colonised world, women came onto the public stage in large numbers through the great nationalist movements of the beginning of this century. Their experience of political activity, and its extent, differed from that of women in imperialist countries

> because of the space created by the existence of mass nationalist movements [and] the widespread rejection of existing political institutions and culture (Coulter 1993: 3).

Accordingly, far from being mutually exclusive or irreconcilable, feminism and nationalism can be viewed as two complementary movements that seek radically to transform existing social and political relationships and structures as a stepping-stone for the future envisioned nation (Jayawardena 1986, West 1997).

It is readily apparent that Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Nationalist women in the North of Ireland have had more in common with one another than with the women on the other side of the political divide. For example, Palestinian women and Nationalist women in the North of Ireland seemed better prepared than Israeli-Jewish and Unionist women in Northern Ireland to cope with the changing nature of the conflict, which shaped a big part of their lives and struggles. Mary Meyer argues that 'there is very little space for women to participate in the Unionist/Loyalist political project, while there is much more space for women to participate in the Nationalist/Republican political project' (Meyer 1998: 19). This observation is supported by my ongoing research on women's political mobilization in Israel (Sharoni 1998b).

The struggles of Israeli-Jewish women and Unionist women were of a different nature. Their coming to terms with their position as women in their respective societies is often informed by settler-colonial ideologies. Jan Jindy Pettman refers to these ideologies as 'settler-state nationalisms' (Pettman 1996: 53). Despite the exclusionary nature of settler-colonial nationalisms, Pettman points out that 'some women, including feminists, sought their place as equal partners in the new nationalist projects, new women for a new land' (Pettman 1996: 53). However, the space available for women to articulate their concerns closed once the boundaries and institutions of the colony (Ulster) or the state (Israel) were constituted. National liberation movements represent a direct threat to settler-state nationalisms in that they seek to challenge the political status quo and to redefine the power differentials underlying the conflicts. As a result, women who are part of the powerful group are threatened on two levels: as members of a group that runs the risk of losing its power and privilege, and as liberal women who believe that women's universal experiences of oppression transcend any differences, including national boundaries (Clayton 1996; Sales 1997; Sharoni 1998b). Confronting and overcoming these threats is a prerequisite for meaningful relationships with women on the other side of the political divide.

The fragility of cross-community alliances between women in Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland, as elsewhere, underscores the importance of explicitly addressing the differences in power and privilege, which have their origins in the asymmetric nature of the conflicts and in their colonial dimensions (Cockburn 1998; Rooney 1995; 1996; Sharoni 1995). Recognizing this interplay is key to building and sustaining cross community women's initiatives (Sharoni and Rooney 1999).

Conclusion

A careful look at the lives and struggles of women in Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland makes it difficult to offer a conclusive answer as to whether political conflict is a setback or a springboard for women's emancipation. While in some instances political conflict may complicate women's lives and set back their struggles for gender equality, in a different context

and under different circumstances a heightened political conflict may become a springboard for gender equality. Some women are propelled into political activism and in the process their lives and identities as women are radically transformed. At the same time, while the escalation of a particular conflict can create new opportunities for some women, it may have grave implications for the lives of other women in the same community.

The rich and complex stories of women's political involvement in Palestine and in the North of Ireland at the height of the conflict underscore the need to redefine what is considered 'political' in ways that transcend the public-private divide and its gendered underpinnings. The so-called 'public' and 'private' spheres and the gendered division of power and labour they inscribe become destabilized, permeable or altogether irrelevant in times of political crisis and especially in times of escalating conflict, when the community faces an outside challenge.

The multiple effects of particular political conflicts on women's lives and struggles shed light on the potential and pitfalls of women's political mobilization in these contexts. Such an analysis broadens, if not radically transforms, our understandings of our own agency, as well as our political analyses and strategies. Furthermore, it lays the foundation for a careful examination of women's involvement in peace making and peace-building.

Note

1. This chapter is adapted from a longer article titled 'Gendering Conflict and Peace in Israel/Palestine and the North of Ireland' (Sharoni 1998a), which includes an extensive discussion of changes in conceptions of masculinity during times of conflict and after peace agreements are signed.

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