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Stories of Gender Inclusion, Power-Sharing and the Good Friday Agreement

Marking the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, we review the gendered legacy of power-sharing and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. The participation of an all-women's political party in the 1996–1998 peace talks and world-class commitments to human rights and equality enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement suggested that Northern Ireland would stand as a conflict resolution and institutional design model par excellence. While the intervening years have been largely peaceful, and women's political representation has improved, years of political stalemate and poor equality and human rights protections for women suggest a mixed legacy of gender inclusion and power-sharing. In this paper, we chart the ups and downs of Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions in the context of feminist peace activism over two and a half decades and offer a set of feminist reflections on the promise and peril of power-sharing in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: gender inclusion, equality, human rights, power-sharing, social justice, Good Friday Agreement.

Vključevanje spolov, delitev oblasti in Velikonočni sporazum

Ob 25. obletnici Velikonočnega sporazuma je bil opravljen pregled zapuščine delitve oblasti in vzpostavljanja miru na Severnem Irskem z vidika spola. Sodelovanje politične stranke, katere članice so bile izključno ženske, v mirovni pogajanjih v letih 1996–1998 ter zaveze k spoštovanju človekovih pravic in enakosti, zapisane v sporazumu, so nakazovale, da bi Severna Irška lahko postala zgleden model reševanja sporov in institucionalnega oblikovanja. Čeprav so bila leta po sporazumu večinoma mirna in se je politična zastopanost žensk izboljšala, pa dolgoletna politična stagnacija in pomanjkljiva zaščita načela enakosti in človekovih pravic za ženske kažeta na mešano dediščino vključevanja spolov in delitve oblasti. Prispevek prikazuje vzpone in padce severnoirskih institucij za delitev oblasti v kontekstu feminističnega mirovnega aktivizma v obdobju petindvajsetih let ter ponuja nabor feminističnih razmišljanj o obljubah in pasteh delitve oblasti na Severnem Irskem.

Ključne besede: vključevanje spolov, enakost, človekove pravice, delitev oblasti, socialna pravičnost, Velikonočni sporazum.

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1. A Beginning

In the conflict resolution canon, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) is power-sharing par excellence, bringing together deeply divided Irish Nationalist and British Unionist communities in a shared government and closing out 30 years of Troubles. For power-sharing critics, the GFA is a fractious political arrangement that has failed to deliver peace and political stability in the intervening years, cementing divisions rather than bridging them. For feminist peace scholars, the GFA is an exemplar of gender inclusion, with the election of a women's political party to the peace talks and the adoption of robust human rights and equality instruments in the final peace agreement. For feminist critics, it is a cautionary tale of women losing political representation and access to power after the Agreement, leaving feminists and social justice activists to fight for the next two and a half decades for access to abortions, marriage equality and other basic rights. Whether celebratory or cautionary – or some combination thereof – these are the stories told of Northern Ireland's peace.

Our aim in this article is to reflect on some of the stories of the GFA told over the last 25 years, not to shape and then settle on a singular perfect narrative, either one of success or one of failure. As feminist scholars of peace activism and power-sharing, our goal is to capture the storied post-Agreement years, focusing on feminist and social justice political concerns, interventions, and activism in Northern Ireland, in order to highlight the dynamism, evolution, and complexities of peace and power-sharing over time. We are particularly interested in how the stories of the peace are told and what such accounts mean for how we think about the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process for other cases and, indeed, for Northern Ireland too.

We are conscious of the risk of beginning our story of the peace with the GFA – memorializing not just an (imperfect) Agreement but freezing in time a period that is still very much unfolding. In this way, we argue that settling on whether to celebrate or shelve power-sharing with a feminist reading of the GFA misses the way the Agreement does not fix power-sharing in place (for good or bad). Rather, the peace is negotiated, renegotiated, venerated, contested, and made anew in the years of political crisis since its signing, offering up opportunities for improving political inclusion and meeting feminist peace goals as articulated by the women's rights movement and social justice activists, but also foreclosing such opportunities as the two-community dynamic dominates the political narrative.

In what follows, we chart some of the many page-turning events that have shunted the peace through political crises to new resolutions, from multiple suspensions of the power-sharing executive to new, renewed, and sometimes failed political agreements. Power-sharing was not done on that Good Friday in April 1998, just as the women's movement did not settle human rights and equal-

ity protections at the peace table. Power-sharing has instead been renegotiated time and again, from the Agreement at St. Andrews (2006), the Hillsborough Agreement (2010), the failed Haass and O’Sullivan talks (2013), the Stormont House Agreement (2014), the New Decade, New Approach (2020), and – a new cliff-hanger at the time of writing – the impending Windsor Framework (2023), which may yet restore the power-sharing institutions and find a Brexit compromise. Agreements like the GFA are never settled but instead are often followed by instances of what Pierre du Toit calls “post-settlement settlements” (du Toit 2003) or what Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil call “formalised political *unsettlement*” (Bell & Pospisil 2017, 577). The story of the GFA, we suggest, is also told through these sequels. Each attempt to settle the sharing of power has both opened and closed opportunities for feminists working to improve political inclusion, human rights and equality in Northern Ireland.

From the perspective of power-sharing and conflict resolution, renegotiation is necessary in part because peace agreements are often written from the perspective of constructive ambiguity, whereby “actors deliberately adopt language that is vague and can simultaneously mean different things to different people” (Bell & Kavanaugh 1998, 1356). While such language may elicit agreement, translating it into practice can give way to serious implementation problems. This is where du Toit’s concept of the Post-Settlement Settlement (PSS) is important. A PSS “can focus on improving and fine-tuning a working agreement or salvaging an eroding one, and on dealing with specific shortcomings and obsolete arrangements rather than on staving off outright political or social collapse” (du Toit 2003, 116). This approach, beyond fleshing out vague clauses, can also address any unanticipated consequences of the original settlement, help to respond to new political circumstances and exogenous shocks, and can facilitate the accommodation of new constituencies. A PSS approach asks us to see the initial settlement as “one episode in an ongoing series of events” (du Toit 2003, 106), in keeping with recent conceptualizations of the power-sharing lifecycle (McCulloch & McEvoy 2020).

From the perspective of feminist activism, a much more contingent assessment is required. The process by which a peace agreement or a post-settlement settlement comes into being represents a critical juncture, but one in which women’s inclusion is not guaranteed and which must be revisited time and again. Peace talks may serve as “windows of opportunity” in that they can be “catalysts for changes to gender roles” (Anderson 2015), but this can work both ways. PSS talks may broaden inclusion, but they may also result in an “attrition of inclusivity” (Rouse & O’Connor 2020, 13). This is where Bell and Pospisil’s approach to the “political *unsettlement*” is instructive, suggesting that:

in practice, formalised political *unsettlement* creates a post-agreement landscape characterised by ongoing radical and extraordinary institutional reform as a ‘way of

life' [...] Within it, pragmatic approaches to elite inclusion interact in complex ways with more normative arguments for social inclusion and create situations of constant institutional flux. Formalised political unsettlement is not a 'bump in the road' on a peace process road to liberal peace, but it becomes the new normal (Bell & Pospisil 2017, 585).

For our purposes, Bell and Pospisil's language of political unsettlement helps us to recognize the opportunities and challenges for building a more inclusive peace in Northern Ireland and beyond for the women's rights and social justice movements – in times of unsettled peace.

2. Begin at the Beginning: Accidental Activism, Accidental Inclusion

In her autobiography, *Stand Up, Speak Out*, Monica McWilliams (2021) – co-founder and elected representative of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition party – writes of the post-Agreement negotiations as such: "like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: 'Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end [...]. There was nothing else to do, so Alice began talking again.' The story provided the solution – more dialogue was needed" (McWilliams 2021, 257). Told to "shut up and sit down" (McWilliams 2021, ix) as a representative at the 1996–1998 peace talks leading to the GFA, McWilliams's memoir records the power of continued dialogue in the face of sectarianism where "exclusive narratives, honed by inherited tales and stories, seemed to justify acts of destruction as a distorted way of protecting each side's heritage [...]" (McWilliams 2021, 247).

Indeed, such sectarianism and intercommunal conflict, as well as police and military violence, defined the Troubles from the late 1960s onward, stemming from deep poverty, employment discrimination, social inequality, and political exclusion (for a gendered history, see Fairweather et al. 1984; Aretxaga 1997; *Her Loyal Voice* 2022). To be sure, beginning in the early years of the conflict, the United Kingdom (U.K.) government introduced measures designed to monitor and address discrimination and eventually promote equality, including the annual reporting of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (for a list, see McKenna 2022), a Fair Employment Act (1989), and the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (1993) requirements for broad-based equality (Committee on the Administration of Justice 2006, 3–5). And by the 1990s, socio-political conditions were improving under the cautious optimism of successive British-Irish negotiations like the 1993 Downing Street Declaration and the 1994 loyalist and republican paramilitary ceasefires. For Elizabeth Meehan, new legislation, which required employers to report to and be subject to the Fair Employment Commission, foreshadowed further advances in equality and human rights at the GFA talks (Meehan 2006, 37–38).

While there were important anti-discrimination and equality changes underway in Northern Ireland before the GFA, we should not overstate the changes taking place. Of the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment, Bronagh Hinds estimates that it had little impact overall (Hinds 2003, 185). Rupert Taylor's assessment is that while instruments like the Fair Employment Act were positive, they ultimately failed to tackle what he called "the full weight of past systemic sectarianism" (Taylor 2009, 315). Overall, though, equality legislation showed that there was, in the estimation of John Coakley and Jennifer Todd, "a sense that the trajectory was moving towards greater communal equality" (Coakley & Todd 2020, 339).

It was in this context of slow moves towards equality, but also stubbornly persistent systemic sectarianism, that power-sharing between the two communities was proposed, from the early days of the Sunningdale process (1973–1974) through to the final adoption of the GFA in 1998.¹ It was also in this context of poverty, discrimination in employment, and poor social services in working-class neighbourhoods that women-led community-based initiatives emerged to fill the gaps. Women's activism in Northern Ireland had been expanding during this period of the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the form of women's centres to deliver services in working-class communities and to share knowledge, offer support and discuss issues such as domestic violence and education (McWilliams & Kilmurray 2017, 548–549).

As Avila Kilmurray and Monica McWilliams detail, following the 1994 ceasefire by the paramilitary groups, the women's rights movement was already beginning to strategize about how to gain access to the political process and to avail of European Union (E.U.) peace funding for women's community groups and other civil society representatives that were interested in participating in the peace process (McWilliams & Kilmurray 2017, 549). In 1995, McWilliams organized a conference titled *Women, Politics and the Way Forward*, which included about 200 women from across Northern Ireland who were interested in getting included in the peace process (McWilliams & Kilmurray 2017, 548–550). They were inspired by and reflecting on their experience at the 1995 United Nations (U.N.) Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing. McWilliams recalls:

Bringing Beijing back home was really important. We took two aims: to get more women into politics and to strive for workable solutions. We kept the policy positions simple and avoided producing loads of papers – we stuck to the three simple aims of working for human rights, equality and inclusion. We were a diverse group of women from different backgrounds: Protestant and Catholic as well as women of no religion, working in the home, professional and unemployed, from urban and rural areas (McWilliams 2010, 74).

Initially, there was no consensus on the path forward, with debate on whether to organize a women's party or to advocate for women from within the existing par-

ties as they stood. Ultimately, it was the experience of the women-led organizing and the creation of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue that set the groundwork for the creation of Northern Ireland's all-women political party – the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) – and a distinctly feminist intervention in power-sharing.

The Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue was itself an innovative approach to negotiating peace in that it required elections as the criterion for entry to the peace talks. Held in 1996, the elections utilized a unique electoral formula, which combined 90 constituency-based seats on a closed-list system along with 20 top-up seats for the 10 best-performing parties and was designed to support the inclusion of smaller parties in the negotiations (Coakley & Todd 2020, 344; for election results, see Whyte 1998). A group of women, including McWilliams – a leading figure in the movement – seized the opportunity to form a party in the weeks leading up to the Forum elections in a bid to get a seat at the table. McWilliams and Kilmurray write:

The Women's Coalition was deliberately structured in a bi-communal manner, with two leaders, one drawn from the Catholic/Nationalist identity and the other from Protestant/Unionist. Refusing to adopt a position on the constitutional question, the Coalition strategized a politics that promoted the greater presence of women, as well as a forum for active citizenship during the political transition (McWilliams & Kilmurray 2017, 550).

Incredibly and improbably, the NIWC managed to get two top-up seats in the election – thus establishing themselves as the only women at the talks. McWilliams (1995, 21; 2021, 78) adopts the term “accidental activism” to describe the way in which Northern Ireland women initially and accidentally became political agents through early experiences in grassroots organizing. As Hinds emphasizes, it was also women's experiences of political exclusion that informed the demands that they made at the peace table, including, for example, calls for the creation of a Civic Forum to represent civil society; the naming of women directly in the GFA – beyond the two communities; the creation of an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; a proposal to create a Bill of Rights; and statutory duties to address inequality beyond the two communities, including race, sexual orientation, age and more (see Hinds 2003, 187–189, 198). In this way, Elizabeth Meehan writes that the NIWC had a vision for Northern Ireland that moved beyond a narrow desire to stop the conflict. The goals were for an inclusive peace, as well as legislation that would reflect a commitment to human rights and equality – goals and demands informed by women's community activism (Meehan 2006, 41–42).

The story of the NIWC, from its origins in accidental activism to the party's rather accidental inclusion in the peace talks, offers a complicated reading of the peace process. On the one hand, it offers important insights both into how ro-

bust equality measures and innovative inclusion mechanisms informed the final text of the GFA, but also it exposes the precarity of inclusion. The inclusion of women in the Forum was not by any feature of power-sharing that required the representation of women. Instead, it was a quirk of the electoral formula that allowed activists to find and forge their own pathway for participation.² The story of the NIWC also tells us that the push for the kind of equality and inclusion measures described above can also complement power-sharing processes in important ways. The experience of the NIWC shows how power-sharing is compatible with other kinds of inclusion, beyond the two communities in the Northern Ireland case, both to the talks and in the agreements that follow. Yet, equally, such inclusion must also be actively fought for even after it is won.

3. Begin Again, Post-Agreement

In his comprehensive three-volume compendium on the history of Northern Ireland from colonialism to consociation, Brendan O’Leary refers to the two decades post-GFA as “the long negotiation”. Tracing the fraught negotiations that restored power-sharing in 2007 under the terms of the St Andrews Agreement (SAA) through to the negotiations that sought to restabilize power-sharing under the terms of the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015, O’Leary writes:

The public could have been forgiven for thinking they had seen this film before. Even the timing of crises and their resolution now looked wearily familiar: crises building up in the spring and summer, to trouble the executive; all party-talks chaired by the two governments in the autumn, sometimes in parallel with other executive and assembly activity; and then, just before Christmas, the reaching of an agreement about an agreement, and a review of outstanding business from previous agreements, all published on an elegant PDF posted on a government website (O’Leary 2019, 280–281).

Whereas power-sharing critics might see this as a fundamental weakness – after all, power-sharing arrangements “do not lend themselves to renegotiation. Most agree that consociational institutions, once established, are sticky” (Horowitz 2014, 12) – for many power-sharing advocates, like O’Leary, “the long negotiation” is what power-sharing is all about. Renegotiation – in the spirit of the original agreement and according to its agreed-upon amendment formula – is precisely what is often required to keep peace on track when faced with the kind of political impasse that sometimes emerges in situations of co-governance. By working through issues one at a time rather than undertaking wholesale revision to the original settlement, a post-settlement settlement keeps parties committed to the peace agreement while attempting to fix dysfunctions; it can also serve as a potential space to bring new parties in, widening the basis for inclusion (Papagianni 2010). Moreover, small-scale reforms can also have a knock-on ef-

fect, directly impacting political behavior and changing institutional incentive structures over time; the dramatic decline in veto usage after the reforms to the Petition of Concern in the New Decade, New Approach provides an important instance of this effect (McCulloch 2022).³

While renegotiation and PSSs might be par for the power-sharing course, much can be gained or lost in these moments of unsettlement. Take the SAA, which is rightly seen as a power-sharing success story: it restored the institutions after nearly four years of direct rule, made the formation of an executive easier by no longer requiring the two communities to support one another's candidates for First Minister and deputy First Minister, saw Sinn Féin pledge support for the Police Service, and brought the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – now the largest unionist party – into the GFA fold. Yet, there is another reading of St Andrews. The restoration of the power-sharing institutions did not include the Civic Forum, which has never been revived. The Civic Forum, a novel political institution designed to bring civil society voices, including from the women's sector, into formal political decision-making, was a NIWC innovation proposed during the peace talks. The fact that the Civic Forum has not met since 2002, and that even its successor, a much-scaled-down compact civic advisory panel agreed as part of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement, has not convened, suggests "the relative ease by which a consociational structure can neglect its sole civil society element" (Pierson & Thomson 2018, 110). The NIWC lost its two assembly seats in the 2003 elections (Whyte 2003), and quietly dissolved in 2006. With the NIWC disbanding during the years of power-sharing suspension, it also highlights how the loss of its biggest promoter at the table meant the Civic Forum could be more easily shelved at St Andrews and thereafter.

Which PSS provisions get implemented and which are relegated to the margins also tells us something about what issues are valued by the power-sharing partners. As Cera Murtagh details,

after the GFA's more broad-based, inclusive process, the SAA and subsequent agreements also saw a narrowing of the agenda and actors, with the focus shifting toward securing sufficient consensus between the DUP and Sinn Féin [...]. As the focus shifted to crisis management and maintaining power-sharing between the two main players, broader inclusion and equality agendas, such as gender, slipped down the agenda (Murtagh 2021, 154).

The St Andrews text outlines a host of promises on Human Rights, Equality, Victims, and Other Issues, though many remain unimplemented, not least of all a Bill of Rights (O'Leary 2019). The promise of a Bill of Rights was a key element of the GFA. After the GFA and the loss of NIWC assembly seats, McWilliams was appointed chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in 2004. As chief commissioner, McWilliams drafted a preamble for the proposed Bill of Rights that drew on the language of U.N. Security Council Reso-

lution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, passed in 2000, which mandates the inclusion of women in all aspects of conflict resolution and peacebuilding: “The Bill of Rights must value the role of women in public and political life and their involvement in advancing peace and security” (McWilliams 2021, 291–192). McWilliams laments in her memoir that the Bill of Rights was a proposal in the GFA rather than a constitutional guarantee (McWilliams 2021, 207).

Indeed, while the SAA commits to establishing “a forum on a Bill of Rights,” this promise is walked back in subsequent PSSs: Hillsborough makes no mention of a Bill of Rights at all, the Stormont House Agreement and Fresh Start suggest that there is “not at present consensus on a Bill of Rights” and it is not until the New Decade, New Approach Agreement that an “ad hoc assembly committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights” is even considered. Though the ad hoc committee was established and eventually issued a report and recommendations in 2022, the 5-person panel of experts intended to assist the committee’s work pledged in the NDNA was never established. The committee’s recommendation was that it supported “the creation of a bill of rights in principle [...] subject to prospective advice from the panel of experts” (Ad Hoc Committee for a Bill of Rights 2022). This later allowed the DUP to disagree with the creation of a Bill of Rights because of the lack of advice forthcoming from the expert panel, leading again to a political impasse. In this way, this round of GFA resettlement led to the unsettling of the commitment to a Bill of Rights.

There are, of course, also stories of success when reflecting on the legacy of inclusion and the GFA. Twenty years on from the demise of the NIWC, the difference in women’s inclusion in the power-sharing institutions is stark, with women carving out political space in the unsettlement. Women either currently helm or have helmed most of the major parties, including Sinn Féin, the DUP, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Alliance, and the Greens. The 2022 elections saw a record-breaking 35 % of Assembly seats won by women. Most of the parties have also changed positions on abortion and marriage equality (save the DUP); indeed, Sinn Féin even made marriage equality a key condition for the resumption of power-sharing after it stepped away from the institutions in 2017 (Smith 2019). New equality rights in these areas cannot be attributed to the GFA or to any of the PSSs – indeed, they come about despite the power-sharing institutions, not through them. It was renewed and new intersectional activism (including across the island of Ireland and at Westminster) and feminist law work (Enright et al. 2020) that made these rights a reality via legislation at Westminster, introduced by Labour MPs, during a period of power-sharing dormancy (Coulter 2020). Yet, the second part of the story is a familiar one. Abortion decriminalization has not necessarily secured safe access for all; in the absence of a region-wide policy, “abortion services across the six counties are piecemeal and patchwork sewed together by activists and healthcare providers” (McVeigh 2022). Unsettlement often means inconsistent implementation.

The story of the long negotiation is both one of promise and peril for inclusive politics. Most pressingly, political unsettlement means that inclusion and equality issues need to be revisited during moments of impasse between power-sharing partners and that even when rights are won or promises are made, each new negotiation and agreement can still portend the possibility of failure.

4. To Be Continued [...]

In lieu of a conclusion, we suggest that the story continues to unfold, with the 25 years following the signing of the GFA best characterized as the serialization of a peace process, not the afterword. This, of course, accords with how we tend to tell stories about political negotiations in post-agreement transitional periods: that is, as peace processes that are more formally structured as a result of an agreement, but which are nonetheless transitional and very much ongoing. Institutionally, in Bell and Pospisil's (2017) words, it is helpful to characterize post-agreement periods as times of persistent political unsettlement as opposed to the fulfillment or realization of a settlement. Understood in these terms, we are not so much recalling a story of settlement from 25 years ago in this article, as Northern Ireland continues to move through varied chapters of negotiation, renegotiation, stability, instability, feminist coalitional activism, and more.

As much as the GFA remains the definitive statement of Nationalist-Unionist relations in Northern Ireland – it is after all the GFA's anniversary being celebrated in this special issue – it is also more than this. It is a story of inclusion and exclusion, negotiation and renegotiations, a success story and a cautionary tale. It entails both steps forwards and steps back and steps forward again (Murtagh 2021). Alongside the GFA, the post-settlement settlement has also had an integral role in keeping the peace process going. Each PSS has responded to moments of crisis and deadlock and has aimed to soften the edges of serious sticking points between the power-sharing partners. Such settlements have addressed a range of issues, including support for the police service, devolution of justice, the creation of an official opposition, the reduction in the number of legislative seats and changes to the Petition of Concern, even as they allow for the persistence of political unsettlement. While there are attendant risks when agreement to a PSS is unforthcoming, such an approach allows for more dynamism in power-sharing performance, and, it is anticipated, greater institutional functionality over time. Yet, each new set of all-party talks and the PSSs they proffer are also moments where decisions on inclusion and exclusion are made.

In terms of lessons for those cautiously engaging feminist scholars of power-sharing like us: Northern Ireland shows us there are real, important institutional mechanisms that can be developed and included in power-sharing processes. And a peace agreement – like the GFA – is not the only place to intervene. Indeed, agreed-upon provisions will be renegotiated, back on the table, threatened and

more as the story of an agreement unfolds. From both the literature on women's inclusion in peace negotiations and post-conflict political institutions broadly (Shair-Rosenfield & Wood 2017; Bell 2018; McAuliff 2022) and from the direct experiences of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in particular (Murtagh 2008; McWilliams 2022; Waylen 2014), we have seen the difficulties women face in securing seats at the table, in being taken seriously as legitimate political players at that table, and in having their issues and concerns enshrined in peace settlements and prioritized for implementation thereafter. But those same processes have also delivered the innovative, inclusive politics of the NIWC, world-class human rights provisions, and ongoing feminist organizing.

When women's rights are missing, either because they were not included in the original peace agreement or because they were negotiated away in the intervening years, it can be difficult to realize gender equality and the promise of inclusive politics. We are thinking here of gender electoral quotas, commitments to equality, human rights mechanisms, and more. Power-sharing, with an emphasis on realizing peace through shared, representative governance, has offered important and potentially unique pathways to include rights and equality. But power-sharing, as it is developed in the literature, does not spell out how to build in these kinds of inclusions and how to secure them during the political unsettlement. The lesson of 25 years of the GFA is that beyond getting women to the table, sustained feminist solidarity activism is necessary to seize opportunities and respond to constraints in the intervening years, no matter the plot twists. This is the story of abortion activism and LGBTQ+ rights still unfolding in Northern Ireland today (Deiana et al. 2022).

Like any good series, we end this article with a real cliff-hanger: at the time of writing, the U.K. and the E.U. have struck the Windsor Framework, designed to solve the Brexit-induced fiasco of needing to fix a trade border for Northern Ireland, and which may yet get power-sharing up and running again after another period of dormancy. Once again, feminist coalitions are readying to protect the gains of reproductive rights when the power-sharing executive returns. Likewise, there may be unforeseen challenges or potential opportunities if the executive should fail to form or collapse once again. The story may yet pivot in a different direction: the prospect of Irish unity – and with it another new and difficult “long negotiation” – may yet be on the horizon (O'Leary 2022). Ultimately, there is no singular narrative that encapsulates the story of peace and power-sharing in Northern Ireland, other than to recognize that what was gained in previous settlements can be lost; what was missed out on in earlier iterations can be gained. Settlements are never really settled, and wherever the story heads next, feminist intersectional coalitions will remain integral for peace and inclusive politics.

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Notes

- ¹ Indeed, Christopher McCrudden finds that equality and human rights were peripheral to the management of the conflict in Northern Ireland – but that they did move into central focus with the GFA (McCrudden 1998, 1697–1698).
- ² To be sure, as detailed elsewhere (see, for example, Murtagh 2008), it was not easy going for women at the peace talks. McWilliams recalls the verbal abuse women faced, describing the atmosphere as such: “It’s been sexist and sectarian [...]. They threaten us, stand and shout at us, they prevent us from having our emergency motions heard. Whenever I’m speaking, I have to make sure that the chairman calls order because I can’t hear myself talking [...]. We’ve invaded their space, space that they feel belonged to them. We frighten them” (McWilliams & Kelly 1997, 11).
- ³ While the petition of concern, a veto right allocated to both Nationalists and Unionists, was used sparingly early on, its use had skyrocketed by the 2011–2016 period, when it was deployed 118 times. Following the reforms in the NDNA, no petition was enacted between January 2020, when power-sharing was restored, and May 2022, when the formation of a new executive stalled in the face of a DUP boycott (cf. McCulloch 2022).

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