Beyond the Ethnonational Divide: Identity Politics and Women in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine.

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Abstract: Ethnic and national differences between communities are increasingly used to explain political instability and violence in the fields of international relations and comparative politics. Likewise, conflict resolution schemes, used in divided societies like Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine in the 1990s, attempt to resolve such conflicts by encouraging ethnonational elites to negotiate a final settlement through a protracted peace process.

Considering the failure of the respective peace processes to resolve sectarianism and violence, this paper will draw on the theoretical insights made in the critical identity politics literature to test the claim that non-elite actors develop local participant knowledge that could advance conflict resolution processes. Theorists like Satya Mohanty and Paula Moya emphasize the progressive political ideas that such actors develop within identity communities.

Using the example of women's political communities, this paper examines the extent to which knowledge developed within these identity communities may help break the exclusive focus on ethnonational politics. I begin with the social exclusion of women in both cases and chart the development of a feminist political identity throughout the period of the current peace tracks. I discuss the experience of activism and coalition politics and the prioritization of alternative political demands such as citizen forums, human rights instruments and transparency and inclusion in negotiations.

Mainstream conflict mediation and resolution theories developed in the post-Cold War era tend to employ ethnonational frameworks for explaining and resolving instances of political intractability and violence. Broadly, this literature suggests that incompatible ethnic and national claims can be reconciled through a peace agreement that is brokered by rival elite political representatives through a formal peace process that secures the ethnonational ambitions of deeply divided communities. In the conflicts in Israel/Palestinian and Northern Ireland, this logic has propelled the last decade and a half of peace negotiations and agreements.

This paper will explore the possibility that in instances of conflict, non-elite and politically marginalized communities organize around identities that are not necessarily ethnonational in political ambition. Taking the example of women's political organizations, this paper considers the largely abstract literature developed in critical schools of identity politics and explores the claim that people organize politically significant identity-based communities at the margins of their ethnic and national communities – communities that can transcend the ethnonational divide, foster cross-community linkages and promote a politics based on equality and peace.

My research indicates that alternative identity-based communities like women's groups have not supplanted ethnonationalism as an important component of identification in divided societies. Indeed, ethnonational claims still play a central part in the narratives around which women organize. However, women have been articulating a distinct human rights agenda that they theorize comes from their shared experiences of oppression as women living in militarized and violent societies. An emphasis on such a human rights and justice discourse could play an important role in future stages of the stalled peace process in Israel/Palestine and should feature more prominently in this late phase of the Northern Ireland peace process.

This paper will explore this claim in light of the rapidly changing political compromises being reached in Northern Ireland and the near stalemate that continues to confound mediators in Israel/Palestine. I begin by briefly introducing the conflict in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland, focusing on the varying instances of success and failure of the current round of peace negotiations within the context of the 1993 Oslo Accords and subsequent Road Map Initiative in Israel/Palestine and the 1998 Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland. Next, I introduce the critical identity politics literature, showing what is revealed when we take this literature seriously. I then test the expectations of this literature in terms of what we are likely to find, namely that: women are organizing alternative community groups that transcend ethnic and national differences; women have different experiences in conflict that inform different political and ethical priorities; and such priorities can lead to untested ideas about how to effect change and promote peace.

THE PEACE AGREEMENTS: ISRAEL/PALESTINE AND NORTHERN IRELAND
In September 1993, Israel and a Palestinian delegation signed *The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements*, otherwise known as the Oslo

Accords, in Washington.[1] The agreement was a product of a series of secret negotiations held in Norway between elite representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel following the fledging 1991 Madrid Conference. The final accord signed in Washington was heralded as an agreement that would end decades of political instability and violence and lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian state and security for Israel. Discussions on the most contentious issues, such as the right of Palestinian refugees to return to what is now Israel and the status of Jerusalem, were postponed until after each side took a series of confidence-building measures.

The logic of the agreement was clear: if those key figures that represented the national communities in Palestine and Israel could settle the terms of a peace agreement, then conflict could be resolved. Palestinian members of other large parties and factions like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Hamas were excluded along with other political and social groups instrumental in organizing the 1987 Intifada – the first large scale Palestinian revolt against the Israeli occupation. Similarly, Israelis were not apprised of the ongoing secret negotiations in Norway and, therefore, public debate on the details and implications of the agreement were limited. Ultimately, the agreement failed to deliver on the peace it promised: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accord, was assassinated at a peace rally in 1995; extremist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad attracted increasing support in the Occupied Territories; large-scale Palestinian suicide bombing operations began in Israeli populations centers in 1994;[2] and the living conditions in the Occupied Territories rapidly deteriorated.

Most recently, there was an effort to revive the peace process by the international community. The "Quartet," including the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia presented the *Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* in 2003 to Israel and the Palestinian leadership.[3] Commonly referred to as the Roadmap, this three-phase approach established 2005 as the deadline for a "final and comprehensive settlement." However, the principles of the Roadmap were repeatedly violated, including the unilateral decision by Israel to build the Separation Wall around the Palestinian Territories. In the most recent Palestinian parliamentary elections, power passed to a Hamas government, further eroding efforts to resolve the conflict.

The Oslo Accords and the Roadmap clearly failed to build confidence and trust amongst the parties to the negotiation. The Northern Ireland peace process was similarly launched with an elite-brokered peace agreement that also established a negotiation timetable. Although the Northern Ireland peace process met with greater success, it was also impeded by similar hurdles identified in the Israel/Palestine case.

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[1] "The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements [on-Line]," www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/22602.htm.

[2] Baruch & Joel S. Migdal Kimmerling, *The Palestinian People: A History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003), 373.

[3] *The Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*; available on-line: <http://www.un.org/media/main/roadmap122002.html>

On April 10, 1998, participants to the multi-party negotiations in Northern Ireland signed a remarkable document that called for the creation of a power-sharing political assembly. The Belfast Agreement, as it became known, received support in referendums held on May 22, 1998 in the North and the South of Ireland: 71% in Northern Ireland and 95% in Ireland respectively. As in the Israel/Palestine case, discussions on the most contentious issues, such as community policing and paramilitary weapons decommissioning, were postponed, to be negotiated after confidence-building measures had taken place and each party demonstrated commitment to the Agreement.

The political Assembly established as part of the Agreement was rife with instability. Between February and May 2000, the Assembly was suspended because the Irish Republican Army refused to decommission its weapons. It was suspended again in August and September 2001 over similar issues as well as the resignation of First Minister David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party. Again the Assembly was held hostage by political bickering in October 2002, when the Democratic Unionist Party removed two ministers from the Assembly and David Trimble threatened to withdraw again unless the Nationalist Republican party Sinn Fein was removed. The threat came following police raids of Sinn Fein offices based on the suspicion of an IRA spy ring. In an effort to keep the Assembly from collapsing, the British government called for its suspension and administered direct rule from Westminster.

Despite the failure of renewed talks to restore the devolved government in September 2004, multi-party talks held in Scotland October 11-13, 2006 culminated in the St. Andrews Agreement to restore the power-sharing Assembly. Following an election to the suspended Assembly on March 7, 2007, the parties agreed to resume parliament by 26 March or face permanent dissolution of the Assembly. Due to the intransigence of one of the major parties, emergency legislation was rushed through the British parliament to grant a six-week extension on this deadline. All parties finally formed a power-sharing executive on May 8, 2007.

The negotiations in Northern Ireland have met with greater success than in the Israeli-Palestinian case where the conflict has escalated through the protracted mediation phases. Although the peace agreement reached in 1998 has suffered a series of fits and starts over the last decade, it has finally culminated in a promise by elite political leaders to restore parliament to the region. The major parliamentary organizations have maintained a ceasefire, and in some cases decommissioned their weapons, which has contributed to a significant decline in major violent upheaval. However, sectarian attacks and periodic bouts of violence and criminal activity have marred the post-conflict horizon. The reports of the Independent Monitoring Commission of Northern Ireland (IMC), established by the British and Irish governments to monitor paramilitary activity and security related issues, continues to find that while overall paramilitary violence is declining, dissident paramilitary groups have carried on sectarian violence and attacks, including arson, "exiling," shooting, bomb hoaxes, attacks on police forces, burglaries, assaults and the use of incendiary devices to target stores in Northern Ireland.[4]

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[4] Independent Monitoring Commission, *Thirteenth Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission* (London: House of Commons, 2007), 6-13.

The presumption operating within ethnonationally-focused resolution frameworks is that peace and security will follow an elite brokered agreement. While elite power brokers continue to engage in protracted political posturing and wrangling, community divisions remain entrenched. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are far from reaching a settlement and, in Northern Ireland, the sectarian fault line features more prominently with each election as support for moderate parties declines.[5] Speaking about the Northern Ireland peace process, George Mitchell and Richard Haass, US envoys to the process, recently wrote about the necessity of including the main protagonists involved in the conflict:

> To be sure, their participation will likely slow things down and, for a time, block progress. But their endorsement can give the process and its outcome far greater legitimacy and support. Better they become participants than act as spoilers.

> Sometimes it is necessary to take a step backwards in order to take several forward. This is precisely what happened several years ago when Northern Ireland's hard-line parties eclipsed more traditional, moderate elements.[6]

The difficulty that lies therein is the sheer length of time that peace agreements remain stalled in the negotiation phase – fourteen years and counting in the most recent Israel/Palestine installment of mediation efforts (with no agreement in sight) and nine years in Northern Ireland (with an agreement *just* secured).

What other political and social issues are left unresolved when all political deliberations revolve around the interests of rival ethnonational figures? What other actors could play a political role during the protracted negotiation phases of conflict resolution processes? When rival community leaders can finally agree to a set of conditions that will end sectarian violence, will such conditions necessarily lead to the establishment of the kind of stable post-conflict society where other considerations of human rights, justice and equality can be raised and addressed?

THE CRITICAL IDENTITY POLITICS LITERATURE
The ethnonational based theses that informed the conflict resolution strategies used in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland and the elite-level diplomacy used, excluded other politically engaged communities to various degrees – communities that did not identify with the main the protagonists of the conflict. The critical identity politics literature suggests that radical social and political change in times of political tumult inspires marginalized people to exercise agency through different identity-based communities to fight for sexual liberation, emancipation and poverty eradication. In this sense, other political concerns, not directly related to the demands of the elite power-brokers included in peace talks, develop during times of conflict.

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[5] Nicholas Whyte has developed an excellent Northern Ireland election database detailing party support during elections since 1885. All data is available online from the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>

[6] George Mitchell and Richard Haass, "Learning from Success," *International Herald Tribune*, 7 May 2007.

Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper warn against the essentialization of the Other category, like the categories *Israeli* or *Palestinian, Irish Republican Catholic* or *Irish Loyalist Protestant*, because it denies the crosscutting relationships that exist between social categories at the margins and focuses on one exclusionary binary relationship.[7] To find that ethnic and national narratives motivate all people in the same way, and to prioritize those narratives during the peace process, ignores the multiple ways in which agents act to realize their social and political goals and ignores their varied conceptions of good governance and justice.

Subjected identity communities can form inclusive communities of resistance in which they can develop and articulate such alternative conceptions by choosing their subaltern identity. Bell hooks writes:

> Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people . . . I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance . . . a message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonizer/colonized. Marginality is the space of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there.[8]

This emphasis is echoed in the works of post-positivist realist writers such as Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M.L. Moya. As Mohanty argues, knowledge of oneself, the social and political world and of power can be understood through the process of articulating one's identity – an identity formed in opposition to a dominant power and interpreted within a particular historical space. One's action is not a priori known based on an evaluation of their i.e. ethnicity or national identity. Mohanty writes:

> But what . . . distinguishes us from animals is that we possess the capacity for a certain kind of second-degree thought, that is, not merely the capacity to act purposefully but also to reflect on our actions, to evaluate actions and purposes in term of larger ideas we might hold about, say, our political and moral world or our sense of beauty or form.[9]

Assuming that one manifestation of oppression is the most important in a conflict situation, such as the oppression of minority ethnonational communities, only tells part of the story about how people experience conflict and how they can advocate for change through a variety of social and political action approaches. Moya suggests that by looking

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[7] Edward and Barbara Hooper Soja, "The Spaces That Difference Makes: Some Notes on the Geographical Margins of the New Cultural Politics," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 186.

[8] bell hooks, "Marginality as Site of Resistance," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. R. Ferguson et al. (New York and Cambridge: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1990), 342.

[9] Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 139.

at oppositional struggles based on categories like race, class, gender and sexuality, people can have access to alternate accounts of social and political phenomena.

Taking Moya's lead, this paper will now turn to the example of women's oppositional struggles in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland and consider the extent to which women's based organizations have developed political goals and ideas about conflict resolution that are not resolutely ethnonational and that have been sidelined by elite actors in the conflict mediation and negotiation phases.

ISRAEL/PALESTINE: WOMEN'S IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
Women's peace activism emerged in Israel during the 1981-lead up to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israeli women organized in groups such as *Women against the Invasion of Lebanon.*[10] This group was avowedly feminist, with members who were prominent figures in Israel's feminist movement.[11] These women were drawn from the earlier feminist movement in Israel that was established in the early 1970s. At that time, these women were concerned with issues related to abuse and violence against women, abortion, pornography, the representation of women in politics and equality in employment and education.[12] *Women Against the Invasion of Lebanon* reorganized as *Women Against the Occupation* after the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon and continued to organize around issues such as the treatment of Palestinian women in prison in Israel.[13]

For many Palestinian women, the women's committees and students movements established through their national parties in the 1970s were their first introduction to political involvement in the Occupied Territories. For example, Khalida Jarrar, Fadwa Al-Labadi, Salam Hamdan and Rabiha Diab, all prominent and politically active Palestinian women, describe how they got their start in politics through various national parties. Jarrar began in the students movements operated through her political party, which allowed her to liaise with other women. It was through the national question that they started to talk about, for example, women's rights.[14] Al-Labadi joined the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1978 where she became involved in the newly established women's groups operating within her party.[15] Likewise, Hamdan worked on national and social issues under the umbrella of the Communist Party. However, she felt that their discussions about equality in her party were abstract and theoretical, and did little to impact the patriarchal and masculine construction of the leadership. She says that in the early days, there were many active women in leftist parties in the Occupied Territories. However, with the defeat of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Islamic parties in the 1990s, there was less and less room for women in the

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[10] Simona Sharoni, "The Myth of Gender Equality and the Limits of Women's Political Dissent in Israel," Middle East Report, no. 207 (1998).

[11] Ibid.: 26.

[12] Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, *Initial and Second Periodic Reports of States Parties* (Israel: UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1997), 40, CEDAW/C/ISR/I-2.

[13] Ibid., 109.

[14] Khalida Jarrar, "Interview by Author," (Al Dameer, Ramallah, West Bank 20 July 2005).

[15] Fadwa Al-Labadi, "Interview by Author," (The INSAN Center for Gender Studies, Al Quds University, Jerusalem, West Bank: 18 June 2005).

national parties. This, she argues, meant that there was less room for social and equality issues.[16]

Diab also describes how her political awakening began in the Palestinian national movement. It was through her imprisonment by Israel as a national activist that she met other women from across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. When released from prison, these women were not given much of a role in their respective national parties so they continued to work together and organize as women on social issues related to, for example, education and health. It was their treatment as national figures by the occupier and their exclusion from the national project that encouraged them to organize together.[17] In this sense, women became politicized within the national parties – developing the practical awareness of the importance of social and economic issues, an awareness based on their experiences. However, as the party leadership was not open to women, with the rise of conservative Islamic parties and the sense that social issues were not being addressed by their respective parties, women felt excluded from the national project.

Palestinian women became increasingly subject to worsening living conditions. Miscarriages due to the use of tear-gas at rallies, limited access to food and unsanitary birthing conditions were part of the dismal reality of the 1980s.[18] Writer Elise G. Young describes Palestinian women as suffering under the "gender-race-class" divide – as impoverished Palestinian women.[19] As women experienced the devastation of occupation differently from men, they increasingly found the promise of national liberation inextricably linked to the hope for an improvement in these conditions. During the first Palestinian intifada in 1987, women's activities further expanded and they developed more women's centres, committees in areas outside of the city and alternative educational sites.[20] Women also took to the streets, to throw stones at occupying tanks and soldiers. Hammami writes: "In that very first period of mass spontaneity, traditional identities were suspended. Women weren't going down to the streets as mothers, women weren't going down as workers. Really, literally, everybody took to the streets as Palestinians."[21] Palestinian women were learning skills related to organizing and networking and learning to develop and articulate expectations that they could use later in their feminist activism.

The political climate at this historical juncture created the conditions necessary for the formation of an autonomous women's movement in the Occupied Territories. Author Rabab Abdulhadi argues the women's movement emerged in the 1990s due to the

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[16] Salam Hamdan, "Interview by Author," (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ramallah: 2005).

[17] Rabiha Diab, "Interview by Author," (Association of Women Committees for Social Work, Ramallah, West Bank: 17 July 2005).

[18] Elise G. Young, "A Feminist Politics of Health Care: The Case of Palestinian Women under Israeli Occupation, 1979-1982," in *Women and the Israeli Occupation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge 1994), 186-187.

[19] Ibid., 180.

[20] Carol Bardenstein, "Raped Brides and Steadfast Mothers: Appropriations of Palestinian Motherhood," in *The Politics of Motherhood*, ed. Annelise Orleck Alexis Jetter, and Diana Taylor (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 175.

[21] Rema Hammami, "Palestinian Motherhood and Political Activism on the West Bank and Gaza Strip," in *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, ed. et al Alexis Jetter (London: University Press of New England, 1997), 167.

declining nationalist movement which she attributes to the end of the communist bloc, the defeat of Iraq by the US and declining Arab unity and nationalism in the region. The combination of a lessened influence of Marxist thought and a weakened standing of the nationalist project adversely affected secular thought and increased the credibility of Islamic forces.[22] In addition, the Palestinian nationalist movement, in general, was less revolutionary at the end of the intifada.[23]

During the first Intifada, Israeli women were also beginning to organize more exclusively women's peace organizations. Such groups included *Women in Black (WIB)*, the *Women's Organization for Women Political Prisoners*, *Shani-Israeli Women Against the Occupation*, *The Women and Peace Coalition*, and *Women's Peace Net*. These women's peace movements tended to be more radical than mixed gender groups. For example, during the first intifada, women were making the trip to the Occupied Territories when the mainstream peace movement in Israel was holding demonstrations.[24]

> The emergence of a multitude of women's peace groups provided some Israeli women with new opportunities to step out of their prescribed roles as mothers and keepers of the home front and to take positions on what was the most crucial matter in Israeli politics: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[25]

As Simona Sharoni points out, women were clearly articulating their experiences in conflict as women. Sharoni describes this as "the movement's cautious relationship with feminism."

The Oslo Peace Process that began in the early 1990s excluded women and peace activists from the negotiating talks. Despite the political fluidity at the time, those women that did play a prominent role in the first intifada could not get permission from Israel to travel outside of the Occupied Territories to attend peace talks.[26] This problem was particularly acute for Palestinian women who belonged to political parties that were deemed "terrorist" by Israeli officials. For example, Rabiha Diab, director of the *Association of Women Committees for Social Work*, claims that Israel denied her leave from the Occupied Territories to attend the earlier Madrid peace talks because of her involvement in the Palestinian national movement.[27] Similarly, Palestinian elite officials that were party to the talks, only invited a select few women to attend peace negotiations. Fadwa Al-Labadi, director of Gender Studies, Al Qud's University and leading figure in the Palestinian feminist peace movement, agrees that except for a few key women like

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[22] Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement," *Gender and Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 659.

[23] Ibid.: 660.

[24] Tami Amanda Jacoby, *Women in Zones of Conflict: Power and Resistance in Israel* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 74.

[25] Simona Sharoni, "Gendering Conflict and Peace in Israel/Palestine and the North of Ireland," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997).

[26]Nuha Saleh, "Interview by Author," (Association of Women Committees for Social Work, Ramallah, West Bank: 17 July 2005).

[27] Diab, interview.

Hanan Ashrawi and Zahira Kamal, women were excluded from negotiations.[28]   This exclusion set the stage for active cross-community organization between Palestinian and Israel women.

The *Jerusalem Link* is an example of the largest and longest running coexistence project organized by Israeli and Palestinian women. Dialogue between the women began in Nairobi in 1985. As Galia Golan, who was present at the meeting, remembers: there was "certain mutuality" among women that created a more positive environment for discussion. "With the all-women's groups, they didn't have the problem of the stigmas that men suffered from – Israeli man-as-soldier and Palestinian-as-terrorist – which made discussions easier."[29]

In 1989, Palestinian and Israeli women met at a conference in Belgium, "Give Peace a Chance: Women Speak Out" and again at another conference in 1992 called "Second International Israel-Palestinian Peace Conference." It was out of these two meetings that the *Jerusalem Link* was created in 1994 to serve as an umbrella organization of the Israeli-based women's peace group *Bat Shalom* and the Palestinian-based peace group the *Jerusalem Center for Women*. The group describes itself as a "cooperative model of coexistence between our respective peoples … together we promote a joint vision of a just peace, democracy, human rights, and women's leadership."[30]   As Al-Labadi who was present in Brussels, remarks: "We feel that women don't want war, women want peace. Just peace. We started to think how we can do it – Palestinian women and Israeli women. How we can make women organize to struggle for peace."[31]

Women's community groups in Israel/Palestine describe the coexistence projects that they built and maintained over the last fifteen years as a space for developing emancipatory projects to further the social and political aims of women. Other coexistence projects initiated by women included joint worker's union cooperation and smaller non-governmental grassroots initiatives. For example, Noa Sattath, chair of the *Jerusalem Open House* – a queer community centre that attracts both Palestinians and Israelis, explains that her work at the *Open House* and in women's groups brought her into meaningful contact with Palestinians for the first time. On the campus of the university she attended, Palestinians maintained a separate student's union from the Jewish-Israeli students and Palestinians are often denied access to local pubs and cafes by security. Through her involvement in social groups that organize around themes like gender and sexuality, Sattath says that she could see that cross-community interaction is not only possible but also necessary for creating dialogue and social change.[32] Sattath's admission that she did not speak with other Palestinians before joining *Open House* is particularly astonishing considering the Arab population of Israel is about twenty per cent. These communities remain relatively isolated from each other within Israel, with little contact between villages, towns and the separate school systems.

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[28] Al-Labadi, interview.

[29] Golan, interview.

[30] A link to the Jerusalem Link's statement is available on-line: <http://www.batshalom.org/english>

[31] Al-Labadi, interview.

[32] Noa Sattath, "Interview by Author," (Open House, Jerusalem, Israel: 27 January 2005).

In organizations like the joint Israeli and Palestinian women's *Jerusalem Link*, participants claim that their shared experiences of oppression as women gave them the impetus to develop alternative visions for a peaceful and democratic solution to the conflict based on principles of justice, reciprocity and non-violence. The social location of women in Israeli and Palestinian society informs a progressive political discourse based on a shared human rights agenda.

> The women in the women's groups (on the Israeli side) are much more radical, in my opinion, than the men or the mainstream in the peace movement. And I think frankly the women, if I look at our various groups, we are very much on the fringes of society and maybe we can permit ourselves to be radical because no one is going to pay too much attention to us anyway.[33]

For Israeli and Palestinian women, activism around issues of gender, with an explicitly feminist mandate, took place alongside key events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the last 25 years – from the War in Lebanon to the first and second Intifada and including the peace processes and peace tracks in between. As Jacoby writes: "These events transformed the arena for gender activism and provided new restrictions and opportunities for women. As compared to the early pre-state period and the 1970s, the current context is more open to women's dissent and experimentation with alternative identities above and beyond the state level."[34]

Today, new efforts are being made to build on these cooperative relationships. For example, thirty-five Israeli, Palestinian and other international women launched the *International Women's Commission for a Just, Comprehensive, and Sustainable Peace in the Middle East* in 2005. The purpose of the commission is to increase the representation of women in decision-making roles during the peace process. The principles of the Commission are based on those developed at the *Jerusalem Link*.

> The International Women's Commission (IWC) will work to guarantee women's full participation in formal and informal Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, based upon principles of gender equality, women's human rights, international human rights and humanitarian law in any future resolution of the conflict to bring about an end of the Israeli occupation and a just and sustainable peace.[35]

The Commission is based on UN Security Council resolution 1325, passed in October 2000, which promotes the role of women in conflict resolution processes. As feminist activists Sarai Aharoni and Rula Deeb write of their campaign to implement the resolution:

> We wish to raise awareness of the connection between women's rights and human rights and the possibility of adding a human rights perspective to the feminist

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Jacoby, 135.

[35] A copy of the draft proposal can be found on-line: <www.peacewomen.org.resources/OPT/IWC.html>

struggle. Thus, we stress the responsibility of women's rights organizations in Israel and Palestine to demand full participation of women in all negotiations and conflict resolution attempts.[36]

There is a strong emphasis on the development of human rights as part of the peace process and a feminist politics of peace.

NORTHERN IRELAND: WOMEN'S IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
Similar to Israeli and Palestinian women, Northern Ireland women also began to organize in the late 1960s and 1970s. For example, the Falls Road curfew imposed by the British Army in July 1970 and internment in August 1971 – "triggered" mobilization of Catholic women. Woman began to loosely organize local challenges to curfews, military arrests and internment. Through these initiatives, they developed more organized forms of participation, particularly through the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and through new women's groups.[37]

Both Bronagh Hinds and Carmel Roulston, prominent women in the Northern Ireland feminist peace movement, describe how they got their start and desire to effect change from their activism in the civil rights movement and later the women's rights movement in Northern Ireland. Hinds, for example, became involved in the growing civil rights movement in Northern Ireland as a student at Queen's University in the early 1970s. She also became the first woman president of a student's union on the island of Ireland in 1974 where she worked with other politically active women. It was her connection with women at the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the Student's Union, that she organized an all-Ireland women's conference that went on to become the basis for the first Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement.[38] Roulston describes how her experience in the civil liberties movement helped her to begin the process of reflecting on her own experiences as a woman living in conflict.[39]

As Hinds and Jacqueline Nolan Haley write: "Exclusion from political and other decision-making forums served to increase women's efforts in Northern Ireland to develop their own structures, processes and power base. Women's active and leading involvement in community and volunteer activities stood in stark contrast to their invisibility in the political arena."[40] As women were relegated to activism within the non-governmental sector, they began to meet to discuss ways that they could become involved in formal party politics.

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[36] Sarai and Rula Deeb Aharoni, ed., "Introduction," in *Where Are All the Women? Un Security Council Resolution 1325: Gender Perspectives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Haifa: Pardes Publishing House, 2004), 5-6.
[37] Sharoni, "Gendering Conflict and Peace in Israel/Palestine and the North of Ireland," 1064.
[38] Bronagh Hinds, "Interview by Author," (Queen's University Institute of Governance, Belfast: 18 July 2006).
[39] Carmel Roulston, "Interview by Author," (Belfast: 21 July 2006).
[40] Bronagh Hinds and Jacqueline Nolan-Haley, "Problem-Solving Negotiations: Northern Ireland's Experience with the Women's Coalition," *Journal of Dispute Resolution* 2 (2003): 392.

Northern Ireland women formed the Women's Coalition Party (NIWC) in April 1996 to stand in elections to the Northern Ireland Forum – an elected body of delegates to the peace talks. They were interested in creating a negotiation process that was inclusive of those not formally elected to the negotiations, developing a complex agenda for discussion at negotiations and building relationships among people – especially cross-party work.[41] Smaller parties were given the opportunity to be represented on the Northern Ireland Forum by a new electoral approach that was designed, primarily, to allow smaller sectarian parties (like the UDP and the PUP) to be a member of the Forum. Interestingly, and unintentionally, the newly formed Women's Coalition Party won two seats at the table.[42] Both Hinds and Jane Wilde assumed the lead of the NIWC's negotiating team. As one representative from the Ulster Unionist Party says: "the moral weight of these women, many [of them] mothers of the victims of the conflict, at key moments brought a badly needed dose of reality and got us moving again."[43] In this sense, women were not seen as equal members of the peace brokering team – they were playing gendered roles as mothers to assist the men in the real business of politics. Other leaders called them "feckless women" with "limited intellect" who had little to offer Northern Ireland.[44]

In the final months of Agreement talks, the members of the NIWC felt excluded because most of the political deals were taking place informally and therefore they had no access. Hinds and Wilde tracked down a liaison with the Northern Ireland Office who was involved in drafting the agreement to force the demands of the NIWC. Hinds said:

> I don't know if this is very clear here, but I know other parties are putting stuff in and there's a lot of tension around the Sinn Féin content, and the SDLP content and the UUP content. But people think we've just come into this damn process. I don't think that people have really understood that we have come here with an agenda as well. And I'm telling you that because we are getting things left out of the draft paper. Let me tell you that the Civic Forum is our bottom line. No Civic Forum, we have to consider our position.[45]

The NIWC were successful in getting the Civic Forum established as Article 34 of the Agreement. It was designed to be a consultative forum on social, cultural and economic issues comprising delegates from the Northern Ireland civic sector. However, only 21 of the 60 members were women – and only two were directly from the women's sector.[46] The Civic Forum collapsed in 2002 along with the suspension of the Assembly, but it is expected to resume meeting when the Assembly is up and running again in May 2007.

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[41] Ibid.: 391-392.

[42] Barbara O'Shea, "Women and the Implementation of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement," ed. Catherine O'Rourke (Magee Campus: Transitional Justice Institute, University of Ulster, 2005), 6.

[43] Kevin Rafter, "Women Spur Northern Ireland Talks," *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 October 1997.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Kate Fearson, *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), Ch.4.

[46] O'Shea, 7.

The women also fought to have 'the right of women to full and equal political participation' included in the draft Agreement.[47] However – while there were safeguards built into the Agreement to ensure that power-sharing represented both national communities, there were none to ensure the equal participation of women. "The absence of any enforcement mechanism for the right of women to full political participation means that it is left to the parties to implement this on a party basis, and they have been slow to act."[48]

Voting in the Assembly was further problematic, as representatives had to designate themselves as Unionist, Nationalist or "other" on important decisions taken in the Assembly. So for smaller parties like the NIWC and other cross-community parties, they had only the choice of Other.[49] Committees and Special or Ad-Hoc Committees of the Northern Ireland Administration also poorly represented women at devolution as there was not requirement for gender representation – only party representation on the committees.[50]

> Women's participation in the political process and in public bodies has not greatly improved. The engagement of Unionists and Nationalists is still the primary concern of the new Assembly, as evidenced by the voting arrangement. Despite a new political structure and legislation, women are still under-represented. Lack of enforcement measures and political will mean that the statements in the Agreement supporting the promotion of women's participation effectively remain unfulfilled.[51]

The Women's Coalition is credited with ensuring that the Belfast Agreement includes a sophisticated equality agenda. The Equality Commission was established and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act states that it is a statutory duty on all public bodies to advance equality in areas such as religion, gender, sexuality and disability. Provisions were also made for the establishment of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Although this was a triumph for the equality sector, equality was still defined largely in reference to the rival national and religious communities "to promote equality of opportunity in specified areas and parity of esteem between the two main communities." In this sense, there was nothing to secure the representation of women in politics.[52]

The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in response to Section 75, did establish a *Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland: 2006-2016*.[53] Catherine O'Rourke, investigator for the Transitional Justice Institute, University of Ulster, describes the *Gender Equality Strategy* publication as "frightening" and O'Shea points

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[47] Fearson, Ch. 4.

[48] O'Shea, 8.

[49] Ibid., 10.

[50] Ibid., 11.

[51] Ibid., 15.

[52] Ibid., 7.

[53] Age and Sexual Orientation Equality Unit Social Inclusion Team Gender, *Gender Equality Strategy: A Strategic Framework for Action to Promote Gender Equality for Women and Men 2006-2016* (Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006).

out that the document is gender neutral and cannot therefore deal with issues of inequality.[54] In response to the first document, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (while welcoming government commitments on gender equality matters) writes:

> … the strategy …. argues that the cause of much gender inequality is not in actual fact inequality or discrimination but the choices people make. It is suggested that women have genuine, unconstrained choices about how they wish to live their lives. In effect, this analysis suggests that women choose to work part-time, be poorly paid, have no access to training, live in poverty, have no value attached to their attributes and take on a large proportion of domestic and caring work for no pay or recognition.[55]

Implementation of the heavily criticized Gender Equality Strategy of the OFMDFM was further stalled with the suspension of the Assembly.

Even though women's role in Northern Ireland – as economic and social agents has changed significantly over the last two decades, their involvement in the political structures, negotiations and state discussions on policies relevant to social and economic spheres remains limited.[56]

The engagements described above differ from other cross-community initiatives launched by civic and corporate organizations. Participants in women's cross-community peace initiatives theorize that their engagement is based on a shared identity and on common experiences of marginalization within their ethnonational communities. Civic organizations, such as the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions and Taayush also engage in prominent and sometimes cross-community partnerships. However, such partnerships tend to be organized around limited and specific political goals such as curbing the hardship brought on by the construction of the Separation Wall, investigating claims of brutality during particular military incursions or demonstrating against the demolition of homes in Israel. Indeed, many of the participants in such limited civic engagements are women from the feminist peace movement. Women draw on a long history of advocacy for women's rights, a large body of feminist literature and thought and women's historic experience in peace-based movements to promote an emancipatory agenda that they see as part of the promise of conflict resolution and peace.

Moving from both the national and civil rights movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s to peace activism, women in these cases theorized that their subjugation was not just about the oppression of ethnonational communities. Rather, it is related to a political system structured on exclusionary politics, elite models of governance, political secrecy and back-door negotiations, and political detachment from the broader social base. If this

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[54] O'Shea, 37.

[55] The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, *Response to Gender Matters: Towards a Cross-Departmental Strategic Framework to Promote Gender Equality for Women and Men 2005 - 2015* (Northern Ireland: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2005), 6-7.

[56] Valerie Morgan and Grace Fraser, "The Company We Keep, Women, Community and Organisations," (Coleraine: University of Ulster, 1994).

is the case, then the example of women's peace movement demonstrates how the secrecy associated with the peace process only replicates the closed, elite political system that characterized the imperial rule of Britain in Northern Ireland and the occupation of the Palestinian Territories by Israel.

What identity based groups, such as women's groups, also bring to the table is an interrogation of the seemingly homogenous ethnonational categories like "Israeli," "Palestinian," and "Irish Catholic" or "Irish Protestant". Such groups argue that to build a peace based on justice and to build institutions founded on democratic principles of inclusion requires more than just the equal participation of major national communities and more than just the careful redress of specific instances of injustice. Such a peace and such institutions require the participation and inclusion of those groups marginalized in an ethnonational formulation – such as women. Women are also well positioned to bridge the connection between civil society and the political institutions. Their inclusion in the peace process, as Bell and Ní Aoláin note, is not just about adding women as a matter of gender equality, but furthering the democratic representation of society.[57]

CONCLUSION
This paper is part of a larger research project that considers several communities organized around themes like gender, class and sexuality in the cases of Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland. I have tried to provide a brief sketch of women's organizational struggle to demonstrate the heterogeneous nature and potential for political consciousness in a deeply divided society.

In the mainstream literature, conflict in deeply divided societies is usually investigated by identifying the elite political actors that represent ethnonational communities in an effort to devise an agreement that can be mutually agreed to by the conflicting parties– thereby securing peace. However, classifying all such conflicts as ethnonational in motivation and nature ignores the ways in which members of such ethnonational groups have been critically conscious of the limitations of ethnonationalism as a means of liberation or as a means of furthering a democratic project.

It is the manifestation of a critical consciousness that arises in alternate identity communities, like women's groups, that has led actors in each ethnonational community to develop alternate conceptions of governance, peaceful coexistence and, at varying historical junctures, has led to cross-community social action. In the case of women's identity-based communities in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland considered here, women were able to form cross-community relationships that developed an agenda based on democracy, fairness, human rights and justice. Women revealed that their feminist political identity cross-cuts their ethnonational identity in interesting ways, interrogating the parameters of their ethnonational identity and informing alternate political commitments and visions for peace and justice. The claims made by the women interviewed for this research paper suggest that oppressive features of their respective

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[57] Christine Bell and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Forward: Women's Rights in Transitioning and Conflicted Societies," in *Women and the Implementation of the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement*, ed. Catherine O'Rourke (Derry: Transitional Justice Institute, 2005).

national institutions and mythologies – institutions and mythologies that maintain the conditions of the ongoing conflict, marginalize their social and political interests. Challenging their marginalization, they theorize, is part of a social movement for change that will also affect the ways in which conflict is maintained.

Critical identity politics approaches to understanding conflict show us that women are in a unique position to evaluate the oppressive features of their national movements and the exclusionary character of negotiation processes because they occupy spaces at the margins of mainstream political society. While these spaces sometimes open up to cross-community dialogue, debate and action, most importantly they can allow women to develop an emancipatory political project based on democratic principles. These women's organizations expose the limits of prescribing conflict resolution schemes that concentrate on ethnonational divisions alone, discredit the assumption that ethnonational identities are the most important unit of analysis in conflict, and, despite conventional wisdom, show how people *are* forming important cross-national political and social alliances and understanding. Women's organizational efforts demonstrate that "nation" and "ethnicity" are neither primordial nor fixed social locations as these identities are undergoing a constant process of internal contestation. The next step for research is to determine how marginalized communities can be meaningfully included in peace negotiation processes so that their ideas about equality, coexistence, peace and justice are not postponed, but integrated in a lasting peace agreement.

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