

**Excerpt from PhD Thesis on ‘Gender Discourses in the Social  
Relations of Irish Peacekeepers & Possibilities for  
Transformation’ 2013**

**Reflecting on my Feminism**

Reflexivity was an important part of this research study, not only to draw attention to the power dynamics between the participants and the researcher and to reduce bias but also to be able to map the internal development of the researcher alongside the external development of the process. For example, my identity as a feminist transformed during the years of the research study. While I was initially a ‘closet feminist’ not because I was ashamed of my feminist positioning but because I didn’t feel the need to proclaim my identity as a feminist within the contexts that I was operating (working for a multinational organization) this transformed to being an ‘out feminist’ once I entered the university environment. My public identification with feminism escalated through my activism work on women’s issues which I undertook as a volunteer with Amnesty International and with Women’s Aid at the beginning of this study. This public stance as a feminist drew me into many debates with non-feminists (women and men) about the need for feminist activism in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (many non-feminists argue that women’s equality has been won so therefore feminism is now defunct). While initially my position was often defensive, as I integrated my feminist identity more fully my style of explaining and sharing my feminist position softened and became more confident.

As I became more deeply immersed in feminist circles, debates and activities my awareness of gender issues grew and my passion to shape the debate took hold. With my appointment as the co-ordinator of the Hanna’s House Feminist Peace Project at the end of 2008 I was given a unique opportunity to facilitate meetings with diverse groups of women across Ireland to discuss the legacy of the conflict on this island, and issues such as gender based violence, women’s role in conflict resolution and peace building activities. This kept me in touch with women who had experienced conflict, particularly those living in the North and along the border counties, and who were still dealing with the aftermath of violence and its impact on their families and communities. While the topic of peacekeeping was not high on the agenda the subject of militarism and violent masculinities was and the woman-centred approach to the project stimulated the question ‘what does a feminist peace look like?’

In 2010 I facilitated a consultation with 200 women living throughout Ireland to inform the content of the Irish National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. This diverse group of women included asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants from war-torn countries as well as women from the north of Ireland and the border counties. Their agreement to partake in the consultation was an act of great courage as many relived the trauma of conflict when they shared their experiences. Their views and perspectives as well as their emotions and concerns were recorded in my report which was circulated to the Consultative Group on UNSCR 1325 including government departments, academics, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police Force) and the Irish Defence Forces.

There is no doubt that both of these projects developed my sensitivity as a feminist researcher and made me aware of the importance of having empathy and compassion for the people I work with as well as an analytical researcher's perspective. They also heightened my awareness of intersectionality and the cross-cutting positioning of women in the post-conflict moment depending on the context and individual subjectivities. For example, some of the refugee women I met were highly educated and some came from wealthy families in Africa but were experiencing discrimination in Ireland due to their status as refugees, their race, their issues and their economic dependence on the state as well as their gender. These women were not being given opportunities to use their skills and knowledge and were trapped within the asylum system within Ireland for many years unable to work and provide for themselves; and unable to integrate within the local community. During that time they are dependent on the state and living with the fear of being sent back to their home countries at any moment, which would only be relieved if they were given refugee status. Throughout this process it was of utmost importance to me as a researcher and a feminist that the women I consulted with felt listened to and that they had their concerns taken seriously. It was also important that they felt the warmth of human compassion for their suffering. The helplessness I felt as I was unable to alleviate their situation was offset by the knowledge that at least their stories would be published in the consultation report and circulated to the relevant government departments to influence change to existing policies in Ireland on asylum seeking women. The resulting document, the Irish National Action Plan 2011, included five recommendations as a result of the consultation.

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