Abstract
This paper examines women’s civil and political citizenship rights in the post-Good Friday Agreement period in Northern Ireland. It argues that while The Good Friday Agreement offered an initial potential to expand these rights, these rights have not yet been realised. In particular, women’s political citizenship rights, explicitly addressed in the Good Friday Agreement, are lagging. Three possible explanations for this situation are examined including: the slow pace of equality and gender mainstreaming, reluctance on the part of political parties to take up available (United Kingdom) legislation to advance women’s candidature for political office and the limits of a rights based discourse in Northern Ireland. Some possibilities for working beyond the Good Friday Agreement to advance women’s civil and political citizenship rights in Northern Ireland are proposed and considered.

Introduction
Issues of equality and citizenship, at the forefront of The Good Friday Agreement (hereafter, The Agreement) continue to shape political debate and discussion in the post-Agreement period in Northern Ireland. In this paper, I examine efforts during this period to expand women’s civil and political citizenship rights. I demonstrate that The Agreement text offered an initial potential to expand women’s civil and political citizenship rights; however, nine years onward, this potential is realised in only limited ways. Women’s civil citizenship rights have been taken up by “notable innovation(s) in equality policy” but there have been markedly fewer advances in women’s political citizenship rights (Wilford and Wilson 2006).

Accepting that The Agreement text and its implementation reflect complex processes of negotiation about aspirations for the future, I identify and consider three explanations for this failure to advance women’s citizenship rights. These explanations include: (1) the specific limitations of gender mainstreaming as the primary approach to implementing equality measures and the extent to which mainstreaming is a disincentive to implement other positive action; (2) the lack of will in political parties in Northern Ireland to address the continued under representation of women in electoral politics and their failure to implement available measures for redress and, (3) the limitations of a rights-based discourse. Recognising these limitations, I map out some additional approaches and strategies to advance women’s civil and political citizenship rights that move beyond The Agreement.

Conceptualising Citizenship and Citizenship Rights
Citizenship, in theory and practice, is a complex concept used to refer to a legal status, an intellectual and political tradition, a guarantee of basic liberties, a framework for political life, an impetus for social cooperation, a marker of individual and group identities, a site of activism and/or a value in and of itself (Kymlicka 1998; Lister 2003; Rawls 1971; Sapiro 1983; Shafir 1998).

Conceptualisations and interrogations of citizenship have been historically and socially contextualised (Lister 2003). For example, economic historian and sociologist T. H. Marshall’s pioneering conceptualisation of citizenship in the post-World War II period in Great Britain responded directly to a newly modern industrialised period, debates about the significance of class relations in Great Britain and post-World War II ideals about democracy (Shafir 1998). Citizenship rights, Marshall argued, were conferred by the state onto individuals as members of a community (1949). Civil rights, as the right to freedom of speech, faith, property and justice, were distinguished from social rights, as the right to enjoy the prevailing standard of living, safety and dignity, from political rights that guaranteed individual freedom of political participation and association (Marshall 1949). Understanding that “citizenship itself has functioned as an architect
of social inequalities” Marshall anticipated that political, civic and social citizenship rights would be successively conferred by the state onto individuals until class differences and inequalities were eradicated (Fraser and Gordon 1992, 42).

Marshall’s ideas about citizenship have sharpened debate; they have also served as a basis for criticism, friction and dissent, with “membership, identity and relationships” constituting central points of contestation (Shafir 1998, 13). Marshall’s conceptualisation of citizenship has proven particularly problematic among feminist scholars who remain critical of his assumed model, an autonomous, male worker-citizen, as one that systematically excluded women’s (and some men’s) realities (Fraser and Gordon 1992; Lister 2003; Mink 1995; Roulston 2000; Sarvasy 1997). Despite these limitations, Marshall’s ideas maintain some contemporary resonance and his distinction of citizenship types shape contemporary aspirations of citizenship rights, including those outlined in The Agreement text.

**The Good Friday Agreement**

Contestations over the meanings and practice of citizenship have been, in some contexts, sources of heated debate, sustained polemic and violent conflict. In Northern Ireland, The Agreement moved the issue of citizenship to the forefront of political debate in an effort to end the legacy of violent conflict between the two dominant ethno-political communities (Coulter 1999; Side 2006). As a framework document ratified in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, The Agreement was intended to “alter the relationships” between people in Ireland and Great Britain (Coulter 1999, 254). Preceded by paramilitary ceasefires, The Agreement established a power-sharing Assembly based on a model of consociation and set out the establishment of institutions in Northern Ireland and steps to be taken in the Republic of Ireland, to assure equality and citizenship rights, including for women (Wilford and Wilson 2006).

To this end, The Agreement text addressed civil and political citizenship rights. While not specific to women, The Agreement text stated that all cultures were valuable and worthy of respect. Signatories to The Agreement affirmed “their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community” (Agreement 1998; Coulter 1999). Formal recognition that different cultures were equally valuable and worthy of respect were central to the political model of consociation adopted in the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA). With specific reference to women, The Agreement recognised as a human right, “the right of women to full and equal political participation” as well as the right of [all] individuals to “pursue democratically national and political aspirations” (1998). Women’s political rights were included on the insistence of members of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) who, at the multi-party Northern Ireland Forum for Political Understanding and Dialogue, were undeterred by claims by other Forum participants that gender was irrelevant (Whitaker 1998). Once women’s political rights were outlined, as the last to be included in a list of human rights, they remained because “none of the other parties lobbied to have [them] excluded” (Fearon and Rebouche 2006, 282).

**Women’s Civil Citizenship Rights in the Post-Agreement Period**

The lack of agreed upon conceptualisations of citizenship and politics precludes the expansive task of chronologically tracing the various advances and setbacks in women’s civil and political citizenship rights and grounding these in the complex and constantly changing political circumstances of Northern Ireland (Miraftab 2004). There is consensus among scholars that The Agreement has publicly highlighted issues of equality. Legal scholar Christopher McCrudden’s 1999 examination of equality and The Agreement identifies three outcomes with implications for the expansion of civil citizenship rights: the convergence of political and equality agendas in negotiations that led up to The Agreement period; the development of a broader equality agenda;
and, the strengthening of that agenda in *The Agreement* and its subsequent incorporation in *The Northern Ireland Act 1998* (1999, 97, 106). He argues that pressures to merge political and equality agendas in *The Agreement* were exerted from within Northern Ireland, by citizens, trade unions, civil society organisations and some political parties, and from groups outside of Northern Ireland concerned with the eradication of discriminatory practices in employment (Brown et al 2002; McCrudden 1997, 98; McLaughlin 2006).⁵

Provisions for equality outlined in *The Agreement* were reinforced in *The Northern Ireland Act* (1998) (Ruane and Todd 1999, 24). Section 75 of *The Northern Ireland Act* imposed a statutory duty on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status and sexual orientation, between persons with a disability and without, persons with a dependent and without, and “between women and men generally” (1997, 110). Under section 75 provisions, public authorities are required to devise and submit equality schemes to the Equality Commission, a non-departmental public body whose responsibility it is to monitor schemes for compliance, provide training and consultation services and where necessary, to exercise investigative powers.⁶ The aspirations of this equality agenda are further strengthened, as a consequence of *The Agreement* by the incorporation of *The European Convention on Human Rights* into law in Northern Ireland and by a proposed *Bill of Human Rights for Northern Ireland* intended to address human rights specific to Northern Ireland (*The Agreement* 1998).

This development and institutionalisation of an equality agenda, over a relatively short period of time, is a tremendous achievement that has required commitment by various governments, bodies, agencies, organisations and individuals. However, a failure to recognise some of its limitations of this process provides a false sense of security about its acceptance and advancement and can lead to complacency in continued responsibilities and overlook the ways in which equality, particularly gender equality is becoming unhooked from political agendas in the post-*Agreement* period.

**Mainstreaming Equality in Northern Ireland**

Equality mainstreaming is the primary strategy for the implementation of an equality agenda in the post-*Agreement* period. Understood as a policy-based approach that identifies and addresses unequal outcomes in policy effects for various groups, the promise of mainstreaming rests primarily with its intentions. Intended as an ambitious and all-encompassing approach to address a wide range of inequalities across diverse and often disparate policy areas, its practice is fraught with limitations.

A continuously elusive definition of mainstreaming has negative consequences for its practice. Conceptualisations of mainstreaming focus variously on its intention, its location and its practice. Political scientist Tahnya Barnett Donaghy’s examination of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland notes that it is “intended to move attention from the results of discrimination to its causes” (2003, 2). McCrudden’s examination in relation to *The Agreement* locates it as “the principle that equality be seen as an integral part of all public policy making and implementation, rather that something separated off in a policy or institutional ghetto” (1999, 96). Irish legal scholar Emma Carney’s analysis of gender mainstreaming in the Republic of Ireland identifies it as “the reorganisation of policy processes as it moves gender equality concerns into everyday policies and into the activities of the actors ordinarily involved in policy making” (2004, 4). According to the Council of Europe, mainstreaming involves “the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that an…equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages” (1998).
The practice of mainstreaming incorrectly assumes that policies are easily identifiable. Social policy analysts Eithne McLaughlin and Neil Faris, in their assessment of the operation of section 75 duties in Northern Ireland convincingly argue that policy, often referred to in its singular form, refers to policies in their plural form that are “diffuse in time and space” (2004, 11).  

Policy functions as a generic term that encompasses a wide range of ideas, decisions and practices that extend across multiple jurisdictions, a situation that is particularly true for Northern Ireland. The effectiveness of mainstreaming is also dependent upon the knowledge and expertise of policy-makers who carry out its practices with varying degrees of knowledge, confidence and commitment (Carney 2004).

The strategy of equality mainstreaming locates these responsibilities narrowly within the realm of policy making where it is regarded as the responsibility of a few key decision makers in governmental and non-governmental bodies; simultaneously, its location in the realm of policy making can also dissipate responsibilities too broadly. That is, once mainstreaming is believed to be successfully integrated across all areas of policy making, there may be fewer commitments to support its practice elsewhere. Some feminist scholars argue that equality mainstreaming acts as a disincentive for other positive actions and marginalise contributors with relevant experience, such as women’s civil society organisations (Stratigaki 2005).

Barnett Donaghy identifies and distinguishes two models of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland - the “expert bureaucratic model” which locates knowledge and expertise with civil servants and the “participative democratic model” which locates knowledge and expertise with civil society organisations (2003, 4). She finds evidence for the latter model, claiming that the area’s history of conflict endows it with a highly developed discourse about inequality and an approach to mainstreaming that draws upon and institutionalises consultative relationships with civil society organisations (Barnett Donaghy 2003, 5). However, she notes that consultative processes are often unclear; they drain civil society resources and establish uneven patterns of participation, including irregular consultation processes with women’s civil society organisations (Barnett Donaghy 2003, 13-18). McLaughlin and Faris’ assessment of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland finds greater support for an “expert bureaucratic model,” one that presumes a “benign, hierarchical and nationally-bound government” (2004, 16, 30). There is no clear agreement about which of these models of equality mainstreaming has been most closely adopted. Rather than a strict ‘either/or’ position, it is likely that the present approaches to mainstreaming in Northern Ireland involve some combination of these two models, perhaps even one whereby continuous patterns of suspension and devolution of the NIA and its powers since 1998 has shifted the processes of equality mainstreaming back and forth between the “expert bureaucratic model” and the “participative democratic model” thereby lessening the effectiveness of both models.

Equality mainstreaming, as a wide spread institutional approach has been adopted and relied upon because of its basis in liberal notions about equality of opportunity, because of its gradual rather than rapid pace of change and because it is constructed as the responsibility of relatively few individuals. Equality mainstreaming offers one specific route through which to address the expansion of civil citizenship rights in the post-Agreement period, but it is likely to remain a limited route in the absence of other, simultaneous routes of redress and in a context that remains understandably more focussed on ending the conflict than on achieving gender equality. For instance, the 2016 target date set for the achievement of the Office of the First Minister/Deputy Prime Minister’s Gender Equality Strategy is inconsistent with the urgency with which civil citizenship rights were outlined in The Agreement and with the continued gendered nature of these rights (Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister 2006).
Women’s Political Citizenship Rights in the Post-Agreement Period

Nowhere has the slow pace of gender mainstreaming been more apparent than in relation to women’s political participation in Northern Ireland. Aspirations for political citizenship rights that were spelt out in The Agreement and were recognised for their gender dimensions have remained largely unmet promises. 11

With reference to women’s rights to political citizenship, The Agreement states,

The parties affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. Against the background of the recent history of the community conflict, the parties affirm in particular: the right to free political thought…[and] the right of women to full and equal political participation (1998).

Unlike gender mainstreaming, there were no designated or mandatory institutionalized responsibilities set out for meeting this ambitious goal. Unlike equality mainstreaming responsibilities that were delegated, in part to civil servants across government departments and non-departmental public bodies, responsibilities for advancing women’s political citizenship depend largely on the good will of individuals and political parties. Although not explicitly stated, responsibilities also rest with individual women to involve themselves more fully in political activities, including political representation. And, responsibilities rest with individual citizens to recognize and rectify the detrimental effects of gender inequality in political processes. Elected politicians, most of whom maintain a poor track record in terms of women’s elected representation, are similarly expected to realign their policies and practices with an equality agenda. 12

This strategy of willing compliance with respect to the expansion of women’s political citizenship rights has proven unsuccessful (Wilford and Galligan 1999). Barnett Donaghy argues that post-devolution, “the main parties demonstrated no initiative or interest in gender equality issues and structural designs did not prioritise incorporating gender considerations” (2004, 26). While there has been a small increase in the elected representation of women to NIA and in self-reported attitudes toward women as elected representatives, it is not yet apparent that trends in any direction have been firmly established. In future, the number of elected women political representatives to the NIA might just as easily decrease as increase, calling into question the extent that the “democratic differential” based on gender is being addressed (Brown et al. 2002, 71; Conrad 2003, 10; Crowell-Meyers 2003, 14). 13 Furthermore, women remain under represented in appointments to public bodies in Northern Ireland 14 and at senior levels of the civil service (Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments 2006; Department of Finance and Personnel 2002, 19 20). 15

A notable change in women’s political representation period was the election of two members of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) to the multi-party Forum for Political Understanding and Dialogue and, subsequently to the 1998 NIA. The Coalition, characterised by feminist researchers Kate Fearon and Rachel Rebouche as “the only party to have overtly prioritised gender equality and look for gender implications in each policy” had been hastily formed to ensure women’s inclusion as decision-makers in political processes (2006, 291). Despite its relatively small number of elected representatives, the NIWC successfully directed political change benefiting women, although this work was not always credited to the party or to its elected representatives. 16 After the NIWC lost its two Assembly seats in the November 2003 elections and following its 2006 decision to cease operating as a political party, the ability to make changes that advanced women’s political citizenship rights reverted back to other means.
that had previously existed alongside the Coalition’s activities, including to other political parties elected to the Assembly and women’s civil society organising outside of electoral politics.17

Despite the brief presence of the NIWC, women have consistently lacked a critical mass in terms of political representation. Since 1999, a small number of women have been elected to the NIA, from fourteen women (out of a total of 108 seats) in 1999 Assembly elections to eighteen women in 2007 (Fearon and Rebouche 2006, 287, 288). In 2001, women were elected to nineteen percent of all local district council seats in Northern Ireland (Sutherland 2001). In 2005, women’s representation was twelve percent, although this was somewhat lower across rural districts (Crawley 2006, 30). From having had the “unique distinction of electing no female MPs to Westminster” in 1997, three women (out of a total of eighteen seats) were elected to Westminster in 2001 and returned in 2005. One woman from Northern Ireland (out of a total of seventy-eight UK seats) was elected to the European Parliament in 2004.

There is considerable variation in women’s representation by political party. In the 2003 Assembly elections women’s representation ranged from 6.7 percent in the Democratic Unionist party (DUP) to 33.3 percent in the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI). Sinn Féin (SF) had the greatest number, seven, of women elected to the NIA.18 In 2007, there were no women elected to the NIA from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP); SF again had the greatest number of women, (eight) elected. It appears that women’s representation in unionist community parties in particular remains tempered by “conventional gender roles” (Wilford and Galligan 1999, 181). However, this situation appears to be party specific, rather than community specific. While the UUP and the DUP have historically has relatively low rates of representation by women, other unionist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the former Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI), are the only political parties in Northern Ireland in which women have held the office of party leader.

There is evidence that attitudes toward women as political representatives in Northern Ireland are changing.19 Data from the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey found that “attitudes towards women and politics have become more positive since 1991, with voters now looking to parties to present them with more women candidates” (2004, 4). It is possible that public attitudes towards women as candidates for election to public office have improved (Galligan and Dowds 2004). But, it is equally possible that those surveyed have become more attentive to the equality agenda and in light of this are more likely to express socially normative and socially expected responses. While those surveyed said that they would like to see more female elected representatives, at least some of them were presumably among the voters who returned relatively few women candidates to elected office. Political parties, also attentive to an equality agenda have reiterated their adherence to the principle of equality of opportunity, aware that they are not obligated to translate this principle into action. For example, no single political party in Northern Ireland (the former NIWC aside) has implemented the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002 which would markedly advance their commitment to gender equality for election candidates.

UK Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002
It is assumed that sex difference in political representation is partly attributable to the “activist gap” which finds women are less willing than men to stand as candidates for political office (Galligan and Dowds 2004; McHarg 2006, 149). Individuals may also be reluctant to accept responsibility for existing gender inequalities by choosing to believe that the under representation of women is an artefact of women’s personal ‘choices’ (Galligan and Dowds 2004, 2). However, such individualistic explanations mask structural explanations, such as the lack of political will on behalf of political parties in Northern Ireland to implement available legislative redress including
the UK Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002 (hereafter, The Sex Discrimination Act). Section 2, The Sex Discrimination Act permits, but does not require, political parties in Northern Ireland to adopt, as a temporary provision, positive discrimination measures for women candidates for election (McHarg 2006, 146; Women and Equality Unit 2007). No single political party in Northern Ireland has yet taken up this available measure.

Despite their shared practice of non-implementation, political parties with seats in the NIA do not share common views about the The Sex Discrimination Act. The DUP has chosen not to implement the Act, noting that the party does “not have a policy of quotas” and that they have instead chosen a “principle of merit.” 20 The UUP voted against the Sex Discrimination Bill in the House of Commons (McHarg 2006, 141; Wilford and Galligan 1999, 174). The UUP states that it supports “other measures consistent with the merit principle that increase opportunities for women” but does not specify what these measures include. 21 The APNI states that “the party Executive closely monitors the diversity within candidates…fielded for elections and those who are elected” but confirms it has no plans to implement the legislation (Fearon 1999a; APNI 2003). 22 While the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) report they have “no difficulties with the Act” they have not adopted the measures permitted by it, choosing instead to work within the party to increase the number of women candidates standing in winnable seats. 23 Sinn Féin (SF) has also not implemented The Sex Discrimination Act; it also has chosen to “work within the party” and through its Gender Equality Officer to increase the number of women in winnable seats and to ensure that party policies “makes women’s participation in political life more successful.” While SF sets no minimum for the number of women candidates, the party executive body, the Ard Comhairle, ratifies candidate lists partly based on the representation of women. 24 The PUP has no official policy regarding The Sex Discrimination Act. 25

Three political parties have implemented limited positive discrimination measures, outside of The Sex Discrimination Act to advance women’s political representation. The SDLP, SF and the PUP reserve places for women on their executive bodies (Fearon 2006a; Wilford and Galligan 1999). The SDLP reserves 40 percent of places on the party’s executive for women (Wilford and Galligan 1999, 172). Sinn Féin changed its party rules in 2003 for electing members to the Ard Comhairle to ensure that 50 percent are women (Sinn Féin 2004). 26 The PUP designates two positions on its Executive Committee for women representatives. The PUP is also the only political party in the NIA whose current leader is a woman. 27

Decisions not to implement The Sex Discrimination Act continue to marginalise women’s representation as a political issue. These decisions are partly supported by public opinion. A majority, 74 percent of men and 66 percent of women surveyed in the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey supported the statement “Women candidates should not get any special treatment by political parties” (Galligan and Dowds 2004, 4).

The failure to advance women’s political citizenship rights is further limited by its framework in a rights based discourse. A rights-based approach is further complicated by the context of Northern Ireland, where a discourse of rights has been portrayed as advancing the rights of individuals in one community at the expense of individuals in the other communities, where the British state as the arbiter of rights remains disputed by republicans and where there is an absence of proposed rights based instruments, such as The Bill of Human Rights for Northern Ireland. 28 There is also some evidence that public support for pursuing gender equality may be eroding. Fearon and Rebouche, based on data from the 2001 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, suggest that an awareness of women’s rights is declining based on the fact that only four percent of survey respondents reported that women were treated unfairly when compared with other groups outlined in section 75 provisions of The Northern Ireland Act, 1998 (2006, 296).
It is also important to consider how laggard responses to aspirations for women’s civil and political citizenship rights outlined in *The Agreement* may be explained in other ways. Have aspirations become jeopardised by disillusionment with *The Agreement* and its implementation? To what extent has the policy paralysis that resulted from suspension of the NIA limited the ability to follow through on these aspirations? To what extent has suspension of the NIA slowed the alignment of the equality agenda with political agendas? And, have aspirations of equality been compromised by shifts in public opinion resulting from the suspension of political and governmental processes?

**Redressing Women’s Civil and Political Citizenship Rights: Moving Past the Agreement**

The Agreement has served as a mechanism by which to outline aspirations about women’s citizenship rights during a particularly euphoric moment in time. It is not clear, however, whether it can, “still serve as vital tool in securing equality rights” (Fearon and Rebouche 2006, 280). Given that successive periods of suspension and devolution have required *The Agreement* to be ‘made and remade’ since 1998 and that its limitations are increasingly apparent, it is important to distinguish which rights *The Agreement* is capable of securing; and where it is necessary to work beyond *The Agreement* (Bew 2007). To this end, I briefly point to three possible routes to advance women’s civil and political citizenship rights, including: the pursuit of civil citizenship rights through international conventions and instruments; uptake of the *UK Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002* by political parties in Northern Ireland; and increased support for women’s civil sector organising.

Where efforts to advance civil citizenship rights have been limited, it may prove possible to pursue these rights through other more robust international conventions and instruments, such as the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* (1979) and the *European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)*. International conventions outline individual rights. As legally binding treaty obligations, they are ratified by states and require the submission of regular progress reports to committees for the purposes of continued monitoring. In response to the UK and Northern Ireland’s 1999 submission, the CEDAW Committee highlighted women’s electoral involvement in the NIA as an important step in linking political agendas with the implementation of an equality agenda,

Women in Northern Ireland had played a very active role in the peace process and 14 women had been elected to the new Northern Ireland Assembly, which had a total of 108 seats. Transferred responsibilities included responsibility for equality legislation, including sex discrimination and equal pay legislation, for women’s issues generally, and for the administration of the new Equality Commission. The representative stressed the commitment to a continuing and effective process on women’s issues in Northern Ireland (CEDAW 1999).

There are no individual or group complaint mechanisms under CEDAW; however, this response of the CEDAW Committee could serve a useful benchmark by which to measure future changes in the post-*Agreement* period (Cross 2003, 10). Any slippage from this position could serve as the basis for future government and/or non-government challenges under CEDAW. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland’s low rate of women’s political participation, in comparison to devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, noted by the CEDAW Committee as problematic, could also serve as the basis of a future challenges to assure women’s political citizenship rights (1999). Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg may be a future site of challenge in individual cases, particularly as *The Agreement* incorporates the *European Convention on Human Rights*. 
Political citizenship rights, identified explicitly with relation to women in *The Agreement* will likely continue to present a challenge, unless the *UK Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates NI) Act 2002* is voluntarily adopted by political parties. The NIWC is the only party in Northern Ireland to have put forward all-women candidates. The NIWC was never intended to be a single-issue party and its achievement confirm that it did not operate in the NIA and outside of it as a single-issue party; however, the presence of the NIWC on the ballot, in the media and in the NIA consistently highlighted the presence and women’s decision-making abilities in politics as a pressing social and political issue. With the party’s cessation, highlighting the presence of women has proven more difficult.

Women’s political representation in Great Britain, for instance, increased between 1993 and 1996 through adoption of the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act* by some political parties (UK Women and Equality Unit 2007). Legal scholar Aileen McHarg, in her comparison of women’s political representation in devolved governments, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the NIA, argues that the “British experience…confirms evidence from abroad that significant levels of female electoral representation are almost impossible to achieve without special measures” (2006, 142).

To date, the policy of three political parties, (SF, SDLP and PUP) to implement limited positive discrimination measures outside of *The Sex Discrimination Act* has been somewhat limited in attracting women as candidates for political office. To advance women’s political citizenship rights it will prove necessary for political parties to demonstrate leadership by temporarily adopting (because implementation is available only on this basis) the positive discrimination measures already judged to be permissible under the *Sex Discrimination (Elections Candidate) Act 2002* and Article 14 (non-discrimination), *The European Convention of Human Rights* (McHarg 2006, 146). In their response to the *Gender Equality Strategy* (2006), the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has recommended that *The Sex Discrimination Act* be added (2005).

Such a move also acknowledges the “pragmatic recognition of women as electoral assets” (Ward 2001, 2 cited in Barnett Donaghy 2004). The fact that 38 percent of all women candidates were elected, in 2007, to Assembly seats is evidence of their pragmatic potential as electoral assets.

An even more inclusive route for expanding women’s political citizenship rights is available through the establishment of a solid base of support and funding for women’s civil society organising, including voluntary and community sector organisations. These sectors harbour pools of undervalued and under recognised expertise and serve as key pathways for women’s political participation in Northern Ireland (Fearon 1999; Fearon and Rebouche 2006). While the women’s voluntary and community sectors are frequently acknowledged as important constituents in peace building, there continues to be too little recognition of the scope and abilities of the sector in the areas of politics and policy.-making. Mapping out the sectors’ participants and contributions could illuminate potential and untapped resources and necessarily expand conceptualisations of politics and political processes (Miraftab 2004). Continued contributions of this sector depend, however, on redress of the ongoing crisis in funding and support for women’s civil society organisations (Quinn n.d.; Women’s Support Network 2005).

Individually and collectively, these three routes for advancing women’s civil and political citizenship rights in the post-*Agreement* period also have limitations. Treaty obligations outlined in CEDAW continue to be overlooked in terms of their ability to guide government policy making. And, it is possible that any political party forward thinking enough to implement the *Sex
Discrimination (Elections Candidates) Act could limit women’s representation by placing women as candidates in ‘unwinnable’ seats. Better support for women’s civil society organisations could provide an alternative sphere to which women may confine their political involvement and contributions, rather than expanding them.

**Conclusion**

Almost a decade onward, the limitations of *The Agreement* in advancing women’s civil and political citizenship rights must be acknowledged. It is more useful to acknowledge *The Agreement* as a limited affirmation of promises made at a particular moment in time and concentrate instead on efforts to advance these rights outside of the confines of *The Agreement*. The potential for expanding these rights must involve a wider range approaches and actions, including expanded conceptualisations of equality and citizenship rights. For example, rights could be expanded to include socio-economic bases in so far as women’s citizenship rights are linked to their general societal and economic disadvantage and socio-economic rights are not currently included in section 75 provisions of *The Northern Ireland Act* (McLaughlin and Faris 2006, 152; 2004). Increasingly complex conceptualisations of citizenship and citizenship rights necessitate more complex means to address and advance these rights in ways that simultaneously address the sub-national and national contexts and reach beyond them.

*The Agreement* can only serve as a vital tool to secure equality rights when its aspirations and promises are accompanied by political will and positive action and when the benefits of advancing women’s civil and political citizenship rights in Northern Ireland in the post-*Agreement* period are recognised as beneficial for all citizens.
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Notes

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1 Also known as The Belfast Agreement, the official title is The Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations.


3 The Agreement is not the only policy document in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom that assures women’s rights; however, I examine it here because of its explicit focus on the expansion of citizenship rights.

4 For a critique of the political model of consociation and its role in highlighting differences in inter-community relations rather than bridging them, see “Executive Summary” Devolution Report (Wilford and Wilson 2006).

5 See discussion of the McBride principles (McCrudden 1999).

6 Prior responsibilities of the Fair Employment Commission for Northern Ireland, the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Disability Council are now the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Equality Commission (McCrudden 1999, 113).

7 See McLaughlin and Faris 2006 for a detailed discussion of limitations in the operation of section 75 provisions in Northern Ireland.

8 This is the case in Canada, where “the responsibility of the entire government for the development of policies and programmes that address the needs of men and women” was cited by (former) Bev Oda, the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women Canada for the closure of twelve of sixteen Status of Women Canada offices in 2007 (Public Service Alliance of Canada 2006; Side 2006a).

9 Women are less likely to be represented on public bodies, including Northern Ireland’s Civic Forum (Brown et al. 2002; Meehan 2003). Furthermore, the ability of women’s civil society organisations to advance the equality agenda is substantially weakened by the sector’s ongoing funding crisis (Farrington 2004, 8). In February 2005, women’s sector organisations from across Northern Ireland marched on the Department of Social Development in Belfast in an effort to address a consistent lack of core funding for women’s sector organisations, despite committed funds from the Special European Union Programmes Body to support grassroots organisations in peace and reconciliation efforts. Emergency funding, in the amount of £1.1 million was initially made available until April 2005 and later extended to March 2006 (de Silva 2005).

10 Brown et al., in their examination of women’s role in constitutional change in Northern Ireland note that “it would be naïve not to recognise that the tense political environment in Northern Ireland largely overshadowed activists’ attempts to ‘get gender on the agenda’” (2002, 80).

11 For a detailed examination of women’s political representation in Northern Ireland, see Hagan 2006.
Past participation rates by women had been poor enough that Brown et al., in their analysis of women and constitution change alleged that, “since the advent of the trouble, Northern Ireland has gone virtually without female representatives” (2003, 76).

The number of women elected to the NIA in 2007, 18 out a total of 108 seats, is exactly the same as 2003. This is despite the fact that the majority of women (66%) and men (57%) reported in the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey that they wanted more women elected to the NIA (Galligan and Dowds 2004).

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland notes that there have been “no strategic promotional initiatives aimed at encouraging women in public roles” in almost a decade (Cross 2003, 20). In 2005-2006, there was a decrease in the total number of women in public appointments, from 38.2 percent in the previous year to 36.6 percent. The total number of women appointed in 2005-2006 to executive departmental and non-departmental bodies, National Health Service bodies, nationalised industries and public corporations was 1,063 (OCPA 2005-2006, 9). The total number of women appointed in 2005-2006 to executive departmental and non-departmental bodies, National Health Service (NHS) bodies, nationalised industries and public corporations was 1,063 (OCPA 2005-2006, 9). The number of women reappointed increased slightly during this same period from 30.1 percent to 32.3 percent. There was a decrease in the appointment of individuals (women and men) from ethnic minority groups. Overall, men continue to outnumber women as member of public bodies and as Chairs of public bodies (Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform n.d.). For specific recommendations to increase women’s representation on public bodies in Northern Ireland see Equality Commission 2005.

An independent review found that the progress of women through to senior level ranks, in particular lagged behind their representation in the economically active population (Department of Finance and Personnel 2002, 19, 20).

For further discussion see Fearon and Rebouche (2006, 293).

Galligan and Dowds have argued that the defeat of the NIWC may be constructed more as “a reassertion of sectarian voting patterns, rather than a vote against women” (2004, 4).

For a comprehensive analysis of women’s elected representation in the 2007 elections in Northern Ireland including women’s presence in party nomination processes see the Centre for the Advancement of Research on Women, Queen’s University, “Devolved Elections” at: http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/UKhtmls/electionNInov03.htm.

When both women and men were surveyed about the statement “In general, things would improve if there were more women in politics” 57 percent agreed with the statement. Women were more likely than men to agree with the statement (Galligan and Dowds 2004, 1).


Personal communication, UUP Policy Officer, 24 January, 2007. The party appoints delegates from the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council (UWUC) to its plenary body, the Ulster Unionist Council.

Personal Communication, General Secretary, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, 30 January, 2007.

Personal communication, SDLP Advisor on Equality Issues, 01 February, 2007.

Personal communication, Sinn Féin Policy Officer, 01 February, 2007.

Personal communication, PUP Press Officer/Researcher, 01 February 2007.
Sinn Féin has called for 60/40 (men/women) gender quotas on public bodies, boards of management and in policy making positions, as well as 50 percent of women appointed to newly created statutory bodies (2004, 2).

The short-lived Unionist Party of Northern Ireland was chaired by a woman, Anne Dickinson (Wilford and Galligan 1999, 170). Dawn Purvis is the current leader of the PUP.

A Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland was first proposed in the talks process, 1992 (Bew 2007, 10).

The Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform has also noted the relevance of United Nations Security Resolution 1325 (2000) for women’s participation in civil society and policy and decision making as it relates to peacekeeping (n.d.).

The UK Labour party adopted the practice of all-women shortlists between 1993 and 1996, until this specific practice was judged unlawful in a case under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (UK Women and Equality Unit 2007).

Article 14 of The European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms states, "[T]he enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other statuses (1950)."

This pattern of exclusion of women’s civil sector organising is reinforced in some institutional structures. For instance, there was no special provision for women’s civil sector organising under Peace I, the European Union’s Special Programmes Body. To date, there is no special provision outlined for women in Peace III, Special European Union Programmes Body (Potter 2006/2007, 6).