soundings issue 12 summer 1999

Crossing borders

Comparing ways of handling conflictual differences

Cynthia Cockburn

Cynthia Cockburn *describes some of the collaborations of the Women Building Bridges Project.*

There are places and times when our differences are nothing but enrichment. And there are places and times when they bring us to the brink of mutual annihilation. In the three countries traversed by the Women Building Bridges project, described in the foregoing introduction, ethno-national identities are not things you can treat as options, flirt with, or use in dressing-up games. In Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Hercegovina and Israel/Palestine they have become things people are prepared to kill and die for.

The three projects, the Women's Support Network in Belfast, Medica in Bosnia and Bat Shalom in northern Israel, all embody versions of these dangerous differences within themselves and have each found their way towards defining them less threateningly and holding them together, for purposes of the work they have decided to do, in a shared project identity.

Having initially made each other's acquaintance in 1996, two years later the three projects embarked on an exchange of visits to share experience on how they do their work as (and for) women in violent situations, and in

particular on how they handle conflictual differences within the projects. This article first briefly delineates the particular national conflicts within which the projects exist, and the constituent ethnic collectivities, and says something about the nature of the three projects. It then goes on to recount some of the issues that came up between them when they travelled to each other's places. In this I draw on the script of videos we made during the visits, with the idea of carrying back home, to those who were not among the travellers, just what had been the substance of the interaction during the trips. The article concludes by drawing out some of the very real difficulties in practical solidarity work across barriers of language, culture, geography and political system - even when peace is the prize, and even when gender is removed as a variable.

Video still from visit to Ireland. All subsequent stills are from exchange visits

There is little need, perhaps, to recall that there is a long history of conflict in Ireland, in which Britain has been implicated as a colonising power. It is also well known that partition of the island in 1921, eventually enabling the emergence of an independent Republic in the South, left the North as a Protestant-dominated province of the UK, with a dissatisfied Catholic minority.

The present war dates from the emergence of a civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. The British government responded to the resulting violence by imposing direct rule. A three-way conflict has ensued between a heavy handed and partial British state, Republicans (mainly Catholic) some of whom are prepared to use force to unite the north with the Irish Republic, and Loyalists (mainly Protestant) some of whom are prepared to use force to resist this.

The 'troubles' as they are euphemistically called, have made of Belfast a violence-prone and impoverished city, a chequer-board of clearly demarcated neighbourhoods either predominantly nationalist/Catholic or unionist/

Protestant. The segregated communities, to a greater or lesser extent controlled by sectarian parties and paramilitary groups, have often been in fear of each other.

The Women's Support Network spans Belfast's two ethno-political communities. It is an umbrella organisation clustering seven territorially-based women's centres and a number of other women's groups. Their aim is to get a better deal, in terms of political recognition and funding, for working-class women who, they point out, are the most excluded group in a viciously divided society. They also campaign for principles of equality and inclusion in peace-making and policy-making in Northern Ireland. The Network aspires to achieve this focused alliance without its members having to drop or deny their very real differences in tradition and political belief. Its members call it 'a united feminist voice *affirming* difference'.

National identities in Bosnia, as in Ireland, are largely an artefact of politics. To distinguish somebody as Serb, Croat or Muslim is to ignore centuries of proximity, intermarriage and cultural flux. But when the federal Yugoslav state, due partly to external factors, became destabilised in the late 1980s, ethno-national identities were manipulated and mutually antagonised by leaders seeking material and political advantage. The result is well known: secession, ethnic aggression and warfare, then separatism.

In its day-to-day work, Medica Women's Association differs substantially from the Women's Support Network. It is a therapy centre that provides gynaecological and psycho-social care to women refugees and their children, and it began as a resource particularly for the many women who were raped in the war. Its 60-strong Bosnian staff include doctors, nurses and psychotherapists, cooks and carers, administrators, teachers and trainers.

The devastating forced movements of population of 1992-5 created of central Bosnia, where Medica is situated, a Muslim enclave. So in Medica the great majority of the women staff, like the refugees they care for, are Bosnian Muslims. There are however still 10 per cent or so of Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, Slovenian or other background, and more who are of mixed parentage or in mixed marriages. All these women share the loss of a common Yugoslav identity,

and they all chose to resist the wave of nationalist fear and hatred and remain loyal to the idea *of* a democratic and mixed society, Bosnia if not Yugoslavia. Unlike the Women's Support Network, then, where the alliance is a consciously constructed one, Medica's mixity is residual. And in terms of constitutional politics (though not in terms of embittering war-time experiences) its women have less to currently divide them than those of the Network.

In Israel/Palestine the principal issue of the war is the recognition as an autonomous Palestinian state of the territories occupied by Israel on the West Bank of the Jordan and the Gaza strip. As in N.Ireland and Bosnia, there is ostensibly a peace agreement providing for phased steps towards this constitutional outcome. But the war here continues regardless of the Oslo Accords and the unresolved injustices of the situation are painfully evident. Encroachment of Jewish settlers onto Palestinian land continues, with the Israeli authorities apparently complicit. Attacks on Israel by Palestinian refugee communities in southern Lebanon and elsewhere continue, met by large-scale actions of the Israeli Defence Forces.

When the Israeli state was established in 1948 it involved the exile of three-quarters of a million Palestinians. A minority however remained inside the borders of the new state as internal refugees. Today they and their offspring are 18 per cent of the Israeli population. Bat Shalom is a mixed group of peace activists from among these Israeli Palestinian Arabs and their Jewish neighbours, campaigning for justice and an end to the violence and militarisation of the two societies. The women involved in Women Building Bridges were members of a particular branch of Bat Shalom in the area around Megiddo, Nazareth and The Valleys on the southern edge of Galilee.

Unlike the Catholics and Protestants of N. Ireland and the various Bosnian ethnic groups, who are not noticeably different in dress or language, Jews and Arabs in Israel are of sharply differentiated cultures. The Jewish women are in the main members of rural kibbutzim. They tend to be secular, collective and anti-consumerist. The Palestinian Arab members of the project are of both Christian and Muslim background, and they and their families make their

livelihood under very different conditions, in a competitive economy and a discriminatory labour marker. All but the older generation of Arabs in Israel today speak Hebrew, but very few Jews have learned Arabic.

In organising the 1998 exchange visits, the Women's Support Network was the lynchpin. During June and July the Network received a group of Medica women, and sent a group of its own to Bosnia in return. And in the autumn months the Network exchanged visits with women from Bat Shalom. In each case there were four travellers - who at home also acted as the principal hosts. And in each case the journeys lasted two weeks.

The programmes were very full, physically and emotionally exhausting. They involved staying in each other's homes, getting to make friends; immersion in the life and work of the host project; visits to other sites in the geographical vicinity, and *to* other projects in the political vicinity. They also included intense workshops and seminars to deal with issues in greater depth and to compare and contrast their practices. And of course a lot of partying.

Maura McCrory, Gillian Gibson, Edel Quinn and Margaret Smith, who visited Medica's home town, Zenica, in central Bosnia, were deeply moved to be in the war zone that had filled their television screens not so long ago. Two years had done little to mend the destruction, for very many shelled and burned out villages and suburban areas are still abandoned and likely to remain so. And every place has its story of expulsion, murder and rape.

Edel said,

> The first thing that struck me was the devastation. Even the first night... We arrived and it was pitch dark and we could see the silhouettes of buildings and we were getting a guide - like, 'this is where this was blown up, this is where these people were massacred'. And we couldn't see it. And in a way 1 was glad we couldn't see it. Because I was upset just at the sense of it.

Zenica was a government stronghold during the war, and the town itself was relatively unscathed. But it took in 70,000 refugees, so that its flats and houses

are overcrowded and there are still many hope-abandoned camps in the area. The four visitors were also taken to visit Gornji Vakuf, a Muslim/Croat town that tore itself in two along the line of the high street. They saw Mostar, where a gesture of cosmetic reconstruction of the historic centre by foreign donors cannot hide the brutality of the Croat bombardment of the Muslim half of the town. And you do not easily forget the aching space over the river Neretva left by the mediaeval bridge, the Stari Most, now blasted to rubble in the gorge.

You somehow get hardened to your own local hostilities. The sight of somebody else's war disturbs the settled relationship you have to yours. Gillian said to the Bosnian women as she left, 'I think people in Bosnia really understand what I say. I don't know if it's the same for you ... sometimes in trying to make sense of your situation we're really making sense of our own'. They went back to Belfast feeling a little differently about home. They felt 'we could have been like Bosnia, this could still happen to us'.

The Belfast women had been particularly struck by the way the Medica psychotherapists talk about war 'trauma' in Bosnia. One of them said,

> I think we diminish our situation by not using it. We have never talked about suffering trauma, never. That's a word Bosnian people have the right to use, because they've lived through a war. But someone in Northern Ireland who had a relative shot or was the victim of a bomb explosion would be called 'victims'. So trauma's a word that I think we'll begin to use.

They were more clear now that what they have had in Northern Ireland has really been a war, not just the nasty little scrap so often diminished as 'the troubles'.

The four Network members to visit Israel/Palestine that autumn were May McCann, Julie Murray, Amanda Verlaque and Joanne Vance. They were deeply shaken by the experience. They had not expected the heavy security they would meet at the airport, the in-your-face militarisation of the country. They were not ready for the contrasts of wealth and poverty they were going to see, the

luxury homes in Tel Aviv, dismal apartment blocks where newly arrived immigrants are lodged. But the most disturbing thing was the political turmoil, the fear, the open anger both among Palestinian Arabs and extreme elements of the Jewish community.

The Bat Shalom women took them across the Green Line to visit women in Jenin, in the Occupied Territories. They quickly realised that, yes, Israel and Northern Ireland are both settler societies, there are issues of land and language, borders and state-making in both regions. But that hardly means the road to peace here is the Belfast road. Or that peace is even in sight. In the British Isles the two governments now want a constitutional agreement. Israel is ruled by unremitting hawks.

But perhaps the hardest thing to take was the disadvantage of the Arabs within Israel. Here again there was a difference with Northern Ireland, where Catholic demands for civil rights have been listened to. Israel is defined as a state of the Jewish people, not a state of its citizens. So non-Jews are constitutionally unequal. Particularly painful is the land issue. Everywhere the women went in Galilee and the Triangle they saw what it meant: the Palestinians dispossessed of their properties in 1948, the establishment of Jewish kibbutzim and towns on the land they took over, and the law that has since prohibited Arabs from buying agricultural land and keeps them holed up in ever more crowded towns and villages.

They had read about all this in the newspapers back home, but tucked it away out of reach of feelings. Once in Israel, bitterness against the Zionist project boiled over. It is more comfortable to forget that there are different versions of Zionism, and to forget also the historic injustices Europe inflicted on the Jews of the diaspora, providing a rationale for a Jewish homeland. I felt it in myself too, a deep desire for everyone to be of like mind on the 'simple' fact of Israeli oppression. But what we learned with Bat Shalom is that the virtue of an alliance lies precisely in holding together people who are of not-quite-like mind. It is relatively easy for an anti-Zionist Jew to work with Arabs. It is much harder, and very unusual, for a Zionist to look for what common

purpose may exist with Palestinians, and once it is found, come out on the public highroad in defence of it.

Just before May went home, with a visit to the Holocaust memorial museum fresh in her mind, she said, 'In the historical context I completely understand the fear and the negative stereotyping. And the war, totally raw and open and near. And potentially going to happen again. They're nowhere near peace. And so I just think they're extremely brave women. I thought that at the beginning and nothing that I've learned, the complexities of what I've learned, has taken it away.'

Visiting Northern Ireland, if you are Bosnian or Israeli, is a strangely disquieting experience. It all seems so normal at first. In contrast to the millions uprooted and hundreds of thousands dead in the Yugoslav wars, in contrast to the massive mobilisation and high stakes in the Middle East conflict, the Northern Ireland war, a thing of side streets and country lanes, is almost invisible. This is especially so now that, for the moment, most of the British army saracens and foot patrols are back in barracks.

What struck the visitors most was the way a low intensity war can result in maximal mistrust and segregation among ordinary people. Ajli Bajramovic, Aida Arnaut, Amira Frljak and Selena Tufek from Medica visited the different women's centres in the Falls Road and the Shankill, in Poleglass and Windsor, saw the way every kerbstone and lamp-post carries its sectarian colour-markings, the way the Republican, and even more the Loyalist, murals and graffiti on street walls and gable ends insist on the thinkability of killing.

And as they went back to Bosnia, Aida said, 'This way of living, separate schools, separate groups - it's a way of life *so* hard. Separated lives, separated religions, this is what I *don't* want in my country.' Back at home, she thought, she would look with more determination for what she and others might do to try and stop the Dayton lines setting hard, cutting the ethnic groups of Bosnia adrift from each other once and for all. Seeing what the loss of co-existence means in Northern Ireland, 'Maybe', she thought, 'I'll become a stronger fighter.'

The Israeli visitors too were struck more than anything by the mistrust

pervading Northern Ireland. It astonished them that even in the practised friendships of the Network there was hesitation about visiting each other's favoured places. The Network had organised a social for their Israeli guests in a pub. It was not too far from the city centre, a place they felt would be respectful and welcoming of a crowd of women - something you couldn't say of every drinking spot in the city. But this otherwise ideal spot was a well known Republican venue. Some of the Protestant women in the Network, including the Israelis' closest friends, felt uneasy about attending. In the end it was mainly the women from Catholic areas who turned up for the party with the Israelis.

The two Palestinian women, Nahla Shedafni and Rosette Abu Rahmon, talked a lot afterwards about this 'night of the Irish pub'. Nahla said,

> They aren't living together. They aren't understanding each other... A lot of the women said 'We are not going to this place'. And I said 'You are Catholic women and Protestant women. You are our friends and we'll go each together. It's not a problem.' But they said 'No!' And I was just so surprised and sorry.

That this was not just a failure of friendship however, and that the Protestant women were not entirely paranoid, was borne out on a subsequent occasion when we did visit, as a mixed group, an identifiably Catholic pub in a Catholic village. Our Protestant colleague, recognised by her car number plates, was threateningly tailed home to her Protestant area by an unknown car. The threat in such circumstances can come even-handedly from 'the enemy' and from those policing loyalty to one's 'own' side. Either way, it is trouble you try to avoid.

The Jewish women in the visiting group, Lily Traubmann and Vera Jordan, also felt shaken by such pervasive threats and fears in what seemed to them a relatively well-advanced peace process. If it could be like this here almost four hundred years after the settlers took the land, it depressingly seemed to push the possibilities of peaceful coexistence in Israel/Palestine, where settlement continues by the hour, ewer the horizon of a far distant future.

It is not surprising that, in these contrasted wars, with their dissimilar peace processes and varying constructions of ethno-national identity, the Network, Medica and Bat Shalom did not have exactly the same approach to what the Belfast women call 'making democracy out of difference'. The Network found itself challenging Medica to be more explicit about 'identity', but being

challenged on the same ground by Bat Shalom.

In the Women's Support Network, they have really struggled towards an important understanding: that we cannot just skate over the hurt we do each other in the name of politicised identities. Marie Mulholland, who was the co-ordinator of the Women's Support Network at the time of the exchange visits, told the Medica women,

> 1 don't think it's always safe to assume we all think the same way about everything. Because our different experiences and different backgrounds give us different perceptions on things. And sometimes we've found that out quite painfully. And that we have to have a way in our own organisations to have a sate space where we can talk about stuff that's painful.

Talking to the Bosnian women, the Belfast four felt worried by what they felt was a sort of silence on ethnic identity in Medica. They understood that Bosnian people want to put the war behind them, that they would like to jump clean back to the days when ethnic difference had not counted for much. But Gillian wondered - could Bosnia be thought to be *so* different from Northern Ireland?

Talking with Selena about this, she recalled,

> When I first joined the Network I felt different. But I never discussed it, never talked about it and never really felt part of the Network because at that stage I would have felt the dominant culture within the Network was Catholic and Republicanism and I as a Protestant did not feel there was a place there for my opinions, my beliefs. And I know other Protestants felt the same but they didn't discuss it because it didn't seem appropriate, or there wasn't space to express how we felt. Could it be that women in Medica are meeting together and you assume they feel OK but some might feel silenced by the fact that they're different.[7]

Selena agreed - it was possible that Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat might feel this way in predominantly Muslim areas like Zenica today. And later, the N. Ireland visitors made friends with a Croatian woman in the town who told them in no uncertain words that in this post-war period the nationalist Muslim party controlling the government are fostering a society that privileges Muslims and

discriminates against Croats and other 'others'.

Talking in greater depth to women in Medica, it was clear that Rada, of Bosnian Serb background, felt ambivalent about the lack of emphasis on ethnic difference within the project. On the one hand, yes, everyone wants to forget all that ethnic-speak. It was the source of nothing but trouble. But on the other hand each of them, Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, Bosnian Muslim, all democrats though they may be, has a different kind of pain about the things that happened, different kinds of loss. Rada's Bosnian Serb parents had been killed by a Bosnian Serb shell. As a Bosnian Serb, she has been forcibly labelled by an insurgent Serb nationalism with a 'name' she never did much identify with and which now, to make matters worse, is one of the most reviled identities in the world. Does she not make sense of such an event from a unique situatedness? For a Bosnian Muslim the recent changes mean something different. She might perhaps have preferred to remain a Yugoslav than to become a Bosnjak. But at least there is something in Muslim identity today to be cling to: survivor pride.

Perhaps, in the interests of making the alliance within Medica real and durable, it would be helpful to acknowledge differences like this. Gillian said,

> You can see there's huge gaping wounds here. And you know that reconciliation is quite difficult. But people keep referring here to 'we were mixed before the war and we're still mixed'. But that isn't reconciliation. That's like there's been a gap. The war's happened. The most bloody bitter thing that could happen to people. And it hasn't been talked about ... And the next thought is, I would have said to you - it's almost as if there's a denial there. Or maybe it's because the pain's so deep.

The fact is, though, that political boundaries in the two countries are differently structured. In Belfast you come up against one every time you want to go from the supermarket to the swimming pool. In Zenica there is no Belfast-style territoriality. The segregation lines are far away. They are the Dayton lines that divide the Muslim-Croat Federation from the Serb Entity, and the lines of

separation that Croat extremists try to draw round territories they claim. So, segregation, reconciliation and unification of Bosnia can seem like something only politicians can influence.

Ethnic identities get too easily picked up and used by outsiders who rake nationalist discourse at face value. International agencies and NGOs try to foster reconciliation between named 'sides'. But both the Bosnians and the Northern Ireland women had sometimes felt manipulated by them. Selena said, 'There are attempts from groups where there are Muslims working with those parts in Bosnia where there are mainly Serbs living, and vice versa. But it's not coming from the heart, wanting to get to know each other, but to fit funding criteria.' This made the Belfast women laugh in recognition. Gillian said, 'We would have had a long history of funders telling us that Protestants and Catholics should meet, and when we fill in the forms we have to have the same number of Protestants meeting the same number of Catholics.'

It is this kind of thing that makes the women of both Medica and the Women's Support Network reluctant to stress ethnicity. And the gap between the Network and Medica on this anyway seemed to become narrower in the light of the greater differences between the Network and Bat Shalom. The Bat Shalom women can never be in doubt for a moment who among them, or in their environment, is 'Jewish' and who is 'Palestinian'. They live in contrasted environments, have different kinds of jobs, sometimes dress distinctively, have a different relationship to Hebrew and Arabic languages. Also, it is their style to be outspoken with each other and never hesitate to 'name names'. The women of the Women's Support Network, when visiting Bat Shalom, were sometimes startled by their roughness with each other.

By contrast the Network women are adept at 'being appropriate'. They avoid using the terms Catholic and Protestant, which they feel are inaccurate and often abused both by ignorant onlookers and motivated parties to the conflict. Instead they talk about 'tradition', 'background' or 'community', or the area you live in or come from. They talk about beliefs rather than belonging: nationalist and Republican politics and unionist or Loyalist convictions.

The trouble is that outsiders coming to Belfast cannot tell by looking or listening who is who. They do not know the codes, euphemisms and synonyms in the Northern Ireland political thesaurus. Because of the tactful reticence, the inexplicitness, of the Network women, the Israeli women sometimes felt at sea, driving through Portadown, visiting a community project in South Armagh or having a guided tour round a former gaol that had housed political prisoners. *Which side were they on?* 'Why did you not tell us' Vera asked the Network women later, 'whether the groups we were visiting, or the women we were meeting, were Catholic or Protestant?' The exemplary 'non-closure' on ethno-political identity, learned by the Belfast women to avoid the destructive stereotyping that is so prevalent in their political environment, sometimes seemed to the Bat Shalom women like a coyness, an evasion of difference running contrary to the Network's founding principle of 'affirming difference'.

So the programme of exchange visits was an exercise in two-level transversal politics. Groups already organising transversally across internal ethno-political fault lines stepped laterally across state borders into strange places where they found themselves responding to marked differences of culture and divergent historical trajectories. The exercise was riven with contradictions, uncertainties and risks.

First, accurate and deep communication of meanings across wide differences of experience is not easy to achieve or sustain at the best of times. And in this case there was a serious language problem. We employed interpreters for particular moments of the trips, including the workshops and seminars. But the project lacked funding for continuous interpretation facilities, so that for much of the time women had to depend on their own and each other's language skills. Besides, much of the pleasure lay in the informal moments of friendship, outside the working day, when an interpreter, even had she been a possibility, would have been an intrusion.

Second, in comparison with a carefully facilitated preliminary meeting between the three projects we had held a couple of years before, the process was wildly uncontrolled. At the earlier workshop, held in Spain, it had been in

our power to take great pains to ensure that each participant quickly felt herself to he recognised and heard. We had been able to pick up on distress as soon as it surfaced. The negotiation of self-presentations by the groups had been painstaking. By contrast, on these exchange trips the participants were scattered about, living in the homes of different hosts. The organisational emphasis was on practical logistics of travel, visits, entertainment. Nobody was responsible for feelings. At times it was a rough ride.

One way in which we sometimes seemed to be on a roller-coaster was in the nature of the emotionally-loaded material we were continually addressing. The projects all sustain their alliances in turbulent environments by consciously or semi-consciously restricting the agenda *of* matters on which they normally work together. Of course the agenda must always have enough of substance on it to make the alliance concrete and worthwhile. But at the same time certain matters, too divisive to be safely handled, must be tacitly relegated to that zone of 'any other business' that we rarely get around to.

In the encounter between projects, these conventions were inevitably breached. The newcomers would ask innocent questions, questions that in their own project they felt confident to address but which could catch their respondents unprepared. Besides, they were going on visits to quite other projects in the host areas, visiting groups that were not cross-community alliances but situated outspokenly on one side or other of the line of national conflict. All *of* this could put stress on the internal cohesion of the projects.

There was consequently an interesting dynamic going on between the two levels of transversalism. The four women who travelled together in each direction, although nominally part of the same project, had not necessarily had occasion to know each other well at home before the journey. The trip threw them into unaccustomed proximity. Often they were sharing a bedroom. They could sometimes look misleadingly like an unproblematic unity, rather than what they were: differentiated individuals who perhaps disagreed with each other, felt unsure with each other. They sometimes had to speak in public, for the group, without being able to consult each other first. It was sometimes difficult to be true to one's own sense of self without upsetting and alienating colleagues by choice *of* words, choice of emphasis. It has to be said however that retrospectively most of the travellers noted 'getting to know women of my own

project better' as having been a valuable by-product of the journey. Responding to questions from outsiders about their relationships to each other had made them analyse them more closely and value them more consciously.

It was difficult to ensure that the benefits of the experience to the travelling four accrued to their projects as a whole. Feedback is complicated. Just as you need good storytelling skills to get your reality across to those other projects you visit, so you need them to recount these political travels meaningfully to those at home. We hoped the videos might help. But these, inevitably, were about the journey of the eye behind the camera and the voice behind the script, which were mine, not theirs. And language comes into it again: how to translate the scripts from English into local languages for showing in Medica and Bat Shalom?

A final uncertainty concerns the framing of these exchanges in a context of research. At times it had been annoying to be watched, questioned or filmed. It risked spoiling the intimate moments, blurring the immediacy of the experience. But a gain may have been greater reflexivity. There was someone continually asking questions, wondering about what was going on. And a lot of writing is being done about the exercise in the hope of generating a wide discussion about the doing of transversal politics. Everything I write is shown to the women involved before it goes to press. They are usually generous in insisting only on changes to words that are intolerable, letting pass the milder discomfort that comes of being talked about, the misfit *of* someone else's analysis, someone else's terminology. But, just as the videos recorded what my eyes chose to see, so the articles are, in the end, a researcher's view.

Above all, though, discomfort came from the fact that the researcher chose to focus not on the actual day to day product, the output, of the projects but on the feature of difference. Partly, a cross-community alliance works because you keep your eyes on the road, on the job you are meant to be doing: fund-raising, administering, giving therapy, issuing a press release. That I continually asked for a discussion of identity processes, ethno-political differentiation and internal democracy was annoying to the projects at times. I

felt I was using, mostly necessarily but sometimes crassly, terms they spend their lives avoiding, deconstructing and nuancing: Catholic, Protestant, Serb, Croat, Muslim, Arab, Jew. In stressing one kind of difference, I was always in danger of submerging others. In particular there was a risk of losing sight of the important differences within major collectivities - the many kinds of Bosnian Muslim, let's say, the extraordinary complexity that variants of secularism, religion, urban or rural culture, relationship to the former Yugoslav state, confer on contemporary Bosnia. Above all, the fact that I wished the visiting groups to fairly represent the majorly conflictual ethno-national groups in the project - that I was asking, please, for two 'Catholics' and two 'Protestants' - was running counter to anti-'naming' practice in the projects. It was going beyond 'affirming difference' to the point of reifying it. But how else, I asked myself, to get them to articulate their discomfort with this and to spell out the intelligent, useful, sideways steps they choose instead? How else can I tell it if I don't hear them say it?

The exchange programme between Medica, the Women's Support Network and Bat Shalom was, I think, on balance useful. They are just now in the process of evaluating it themselves. No significant damage was done. There may have been significant gains. It seems that Medica and the Network may continue to work together, the Bosnians bringing trauma counselling skills to Belfast, the Northern Ireland women taking community development know-how to Zenica.

But if the trans-national learning was viable, it was because of two qualities the projects brought to it. First, it was important that each of the three had the experience of being a difficult alliance. It saved them from falling too heavily onto one side or the other on the conflictual terrain they visited. It enabled them, instead of simply 'condemning the oppressor' and questioning the propriety of co-operation, to value and endorse the commitment of the host group to negotiating democracy in a situation deformed by injustice. Second, the intrinsic robustness *of* the projects, the strength and flexibility of their internal relationships, enabled them to thrive and grow on the new material they found themselves working on. Instead, as might have happened, of being destabilised and divided by the challenge. Less experienced transversalists, less skilled at translations, might have fared worse.