

When is peace?

Women's post-accord experiences in three countries

Cynthia Cockburn

What has happened to women's hopes for peace
in Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and
Israel-Palestine?

Pace is elusive. I don't mean that it eludes us in a practical sense - we think we have it, and then war returns. This is often so, of course. No. I mean in the sense that it's difficult to be sure what conditions we may confidently say add up to a time of peace.

In 1995-6 I went to interview peace-minded women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine. It was a time when peace agreements were in the air. In early 2012 I went back to revisit as many of the original women as I could find, and to ask them what had flowed from that hopeful moment.¹ I wanted to find out how their campaigns had fared in the intervening years - and what had become of peace.

The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, drafted at Dayton, Ohio, was signed in Paris on 14 December 1995, bringing an end to the series of ethnic secessions and aggressions that had destroyed Federal Yugoslavia. Eleven days later I sat down to Christmas dinner in Medica Women's Therapy Centre. Christmas dinner? In Muslim central Bosnia? Yes, because the

Soundings

staff of this extraordinary women's organisation, a medical, psychiatric and social resource for women raped and traumatised in the war - a clientele that was mainly Muslim - were an ethnically-mixed team. The majority were certainly Bosniak, as Muslims were now called, though that did not necessarily mean they had set much store by the fact before the identity was forced on them by nationalist demagogues mobilising Croatian and Serbian resurgences in the Yugoslav republics. They had been members of the League of Communists, most likely atheists. Very few would have adhered to a mosque. A minority of the Medica staff, however, were women of other 'names' - Bosnian Serb/Orthodox and Bosnian Croat/Catholic - or of mixed birth, or in mixed marriages. They had stayed put in Zenica, refusing to be intimidated into following the logic of the war by fleeing to territory secured by 'their' people in 'their' name. The Christmas dinner was not exactly an Orthodox or Catholic celebration, more an excuse, in a time of scarcity, to cook up something special and give presents all round. Having the privilege of living among them for a while, I tried to be usefully involved in Medica's information department - fundraising, using my camera and resources to make publicity materials, and passing on research knowhow. But my own purpose was to study and understand the thinking, processes and practices that enabled them to set aside the hugely divisive issues raised between them by the militarised nationalist projects of 'ethnic cleansing' in the region, and to work as a co-operative and feminist collective for the care of war survivors.

In Northern Ireland, that year of 1996, ceasefires were on the cards, and a peace process was gradually gearing up. It would culminate in the Peace Agreement signed on Good Friday 1998 that, although it could not right the wrongs of several centuries of colonial oppression, closed three decades of sporadic conflict. From the late 1970s there had been a move by women in many neighbourhoods of Belfast to open drop-in centres, a resource for local women. The city map is a patchwork of Catholic and Protestant housing areas, deeply divided by Republican and Loyalist affinities. Yet in a striking act of solidarity the women's centre of the deeply Protestant Shankill Road came to the support of the Falls Road women's centre when the City Council discriminated against the latter as supposed 'IRA supporters'. Thenceforth the two centres set up, with some other women's organisations and trade union input, a cross-community Women's Support Network. It became a feminist voice of working-class women in Belfast, finding common ground in the poverty, violence and political neglect besetting their neighbourhoods. Their co-

When is peace?

operation across conflict lines was condemned and punished by the armed groups controlling their streets. I stayed close to the Network for some months, to observe and learn from their deft and intelligent footwork in dealing with historical injustice, and the bitter contemporary divisions between them.

My project would later bring the Belfast women into contact, in a residential workshop and an exchange of visits, with the Bosnian women of Medica, and a third group with whom I was working in Israel-Palestine. There, the provisions agreed in the 1993 Oslo Accords, 'The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements', were gradually being implemented in the occupied West Bank, and giving cause for hope of an eventual settlement that would bring statehood, if not justice, to Palestinians. That same year, up in the north of the region, in the Galilee, the Jezreel Valley and the Wadi Ara, a group of Jewish and Palestinian women had started meeting. They demonstrated together in roadside 'Women in Black' vigils against the occupation. But, more than most 'peace groups', they called for full equality and democratic rights for the Palestinian minority within the state of Israel. They took the name Bat Shalom (Daughter of Peace), identifying themselves as a local branch of an organisation based in Jerusalem - though the latter did not share their emphasis on this internal issue. The Jewish members of Bat Shalom of the North lived on the agricultural *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* that spread across the fertile plains. The Palestinian women came from Nazareth, Umm el-Fahm, Ara and other densely inhabited Arab towns and villages confined to the unproductive hills. Neighbours though they were, these two peoples seldom came in contact. The cultural, economic and political disparities between them were great. And the historic injustice of Israel's theft of Palestinian land and expulsion of the majority of their community in 1948, followed by occupation in 1967 of the adjacent territories where many had taken refuge, was an enduring cause of antagonism in the Palestinians' relationship with the Jews among whom they lived. As with Medica and the Women's Support Network, my main research interest in Bat Shalom of the North was the processes and practices the women learned and employed in order to work together in a shared project of action, despite these sources of animosity.

I called my book about the three organisations *The Space Between Us*.² How did they cross that space - with words instead of bullets? That had been my question. So, revisiting the women sixteen years later, I hoped to find out what had become of that

Soundings

space, that distance between peoples thrown by political forces into ethno-national antagonism, in the wake of the peace accords of the 1990s. Is their dialogue any easier today? I did not expect violence to have ended altogether, but what trajectory had it taken, and with what effect on women attempting to prefigure peace?

Bosnia-Herzegovina

In Bosnia-Herzegovina I found Medica had lost its mixity. It was now almost entirely Muslim. The current director, Sabiha Haskić, had previously been Medica's Muslim religious counsellor. A second old friend I was equally delighted to find there was Ferida Djekić. Now the senior nurse, she is unique in today's Medica in being of mixed origin and in a mixed marriage. She said: 'I don't belong to any religious groups! I belong only to myself. Nobody sees me as Bosnian, Croat or Serb, because I don't allow it. I celebrate every holiday in the calendar, Christian, Muslim, whatever, to be a good example to the children. It's not a person's name, but how they behave that matters'.



It is not that the 'other others' have been driven away from Medica, far from it. It just happened, for lack of a policy to the contrary. In the post-conflict years, as Medica turned its attention from war victims to survivors of domestic violence, the staffing requirements changed. Some of those of Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat 'name' (I use this formula to reflect the women's distaste for ascribed identities) had been doctors or psychotherapists, and had gone

Little but apples in this local fruit market. In Zenica today people shop for basics, not luxuries.

When is peace?

back to their former jobs in the hospitals, or had moved on to apply their skills in other war zones. For some there had been families to raise, or they had fallen ill, or retirement age had arrived.

Rada Stakić, of Bosnian Serb 'name', who had worked in Medica as an interpreter during the war, was now teaching language skills in a university. She reminded me that she herself had never deemed Medica's mixity 'special', as I had done. For her it had simply been Yugoslav 'normality'. The civility they had sustained in the war, she said, continued to be unproblematic in the town of Zenica today, among 'normal' people. However, like the other seventeen women I re-interviewed this year in Bosnia, she was utterly dismayed and enraged by the relentlessly nationalistic tenor of postwar political culture in BiH. The Dayton Accord created a weak state, comprised of two strong entities, constitutionally ethnic, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (subdivided into Bosniak/Muslim and Croat/Orthodox areas). Rather than diminishing nationalist enmity, this structure had fostered and rewarded it. Instead of any acknowledgment of guilt, any practice of transitional justice, irresponsible leaders could persist in mutual blame. The one or two political parties that do attempt to recruit from all 'names' and work for inclusive democracy have no hope of winning power. Throughout 2011 a nationalist deadlock made it impossible to form a government, so that the collapse of the state into bankruptcy and anarchy was only averted at the eleventh hour. The state survived into 2012, holding together by a thread. When I was there, in March, the armed men of all three sides were still enlisted

Second-hand books and tokens of love - a Zenica street scene, soon after Valentines' Day 2012.



Soundings



Zenica women's basketball team play visitors from Belgrade. Team loyalties express love of the game, bypassing politicians' nationalist rivalries.

Medica Women's Therapy Centre provide practical job training for women who come to them for refuge from domestic violence.

When is peace?

in a single postwar army, and I was told of a hopeful instance of cross-communal solidarity - former soldiers of assorted identity had been supporting each other in protest against non-payment of their pensions. Yet at the time of writing, late in 2012, there is talk of that unified army splitting apart, its fragments adhering to the nationalists that are pulling the country to pieces beneath its feet. Many fear a renewal of ethnic war prompted by Serb secession.

Meanwhile, for many women in postwar Bosnia, the gendered violence of the war that had torn towns and villages apart was now wrecking households. The postwar economic situation in BiH - characterised by poverty, joblessness and lack of prospects - provided a fertile base for the pathology of masculine violence. Many men, brutalised by the fighting, some by now experienced rapists, came back and turned the home itself into a battleground. Domestic violence and civilian rape became 'a widespread social problem ... and a serious breach of human rights'.³ By the late 1990s, Medica had established a refuge for women surviving violence, and located themselves within an international movement of 'zero tolerance'. Jointly with other women's NGOs they successfully lobbied the government for laws to protect women. But when they accepted public funding and the partnership of the local council's Social Welfare Department, some women couldn't help feeling that feminist autonomy had been compromised.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland I was shocked to find the walls of some Loyalist districts still disfigured by the old murals of men in black balaclavas wielding assault rifles - graphic intimidation that you might rather have expected, yet would not have found, in Bosnia. Indeed there were new murals, the paint still fresh, despite a well-meaning 'Reimaging Initiative' meant to wipe sectarian aggression off the city's walls. Many Belfast neighbourhoods, besides, are still divided by 'interfaces', high fences constructed to discourage raids into enemy territory. None of these so-called peace walls have been dismantled since the Peace Agreement, and indeed some have been built since that time.⁴ True, the British Army is less in-your-face today, despite continuing sporadic assassinations of security personnel by the real IRA. In the main, the militarised masculinity that in Bosnia has been corralled within its unified army, in Northern Ireland has turned its weapons inwards. Loyalist gangs

Soundings



New high-rise developments lift the post-conflict city centre into European modernity.

fight each other for control of various illegal enterprises. Rebel Republicans bully young drug pushers in their own communities with a brutality they used to visit on collaborators or the enemy. Unemployed and demoralised men take it out on their wives and partners. As in Bosnia, rising domestic violence is a feature of 'peace' here.

In Belfast I spoke with thirteen of the women from my original study. Two of them were still co-ordinators of women's centres - the Windsor Women's Centre in the deeply Loyalist

neighbourhood The Village, and Footprints, a centre in Catholic Poleglass. Sustaining the Women's Support Network's former practice of dialogue, they attempt a 'twinning' partnership. I asked them whether the risk involved in cross-community working was measurably less than it had been fifteen years ago. Gillian Gibson, co-ordinator of Footprints, said that, while it seemed acceptable now to exchange staff between the two women's centres, there was as yet little or no contact between their women users. The inhibition today comes primarily from the Protestant side; and it is not the choice of the women but the effect of the punitive stance of the men in these communities. Eleanor Jordan, co-ordinator of the Windsor Centre, confirmed that any contact with Footprints, or with other centres in Catholic areas such as the neighbouring Falls Road, much as they themselves welcome it, still has to be 'done in silence - we don't advertise it'. She noted a certain irony in this. In the Centre they urge women to have the courage to break the silence about male violence in their own lives:

But the silence in this neighbourhood goes on unbroken. Nobody can leave their past behind them. You are still known for what you were.

When is peace?



Loyalist militancy still menaces the pedestrian who steps onto the 'wrong' pavement in Belfast.

Meanwhile, the Women's Support Network, in which Footprints and Windsor were once energetic protagonists, has lost its political feminist edge with the coming of 'peace'. It no longer challenges the politicians and the administration, turning the state's 'community development' into women's community empowerment. In a way reminiscent of Bosnia, the women's centres have obtained secure state funding. Management paperwork has taken over from campaigning as their budgets have grown to provide services for women and children. And they prudently desist from biting the hand that feeds them.

On the other hand, new developments like the Odyssey Arena, the Obel Tower and the massive Titanic centre make Belfast look pretty much like any other twenty-first century European city today. Of course, the Loyalist marching season still pits neighbourhoods against each other, but a shared public space is emerging. The women say that the centre of town today feels more like common ground than it once did. May McCann, a lover of folk music, tells me that the centre is developing slowly from a dark, gate-ringed, no-go area into a place where people of all religions and politics can come together in new venues, arts centres, bars and restaurants. The young, in particular, may be mixing more. A recent survey

Soundings



Footprints Women's Centre in Poleglass, West Belfast. The women and children grow vegetables in their own garden, cook them in the kitchens, serve and eat them in their community café.

showed that, despite the continuation of segregated schooling, today's sixteen-year-olds, the generation born after the 1994 ceasefires, are a tad more likely than their predecessors to cross the religious divide to make friends. Just one in five (22 per cent) today has no mates from the other main tradition, compared to one in three (33 per cent) in 2003.⁵

The 'power sharing' regime in Northern Ireland, the rigid tango Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party perform in each other's embrace, does not lend itself to spontaneous democracy with a vital left opposition. On the other hand it is a good sight more reassuring than Bosnia-Herzegovina's gridlocked nationalisms. And it certainly compares favourably with the situation in Israel, where the rift between the Zionist state and the political representatives of its subjugated Palestinians has grown steadily wider.

When is peace?

Israel-Palestine

In 1996, when I first spent time with the women of Bat Shalom, there was cautious optimism in the region. Although the Oslo Accords were disliked by the Jewish right and were felt by many Palestinians to be co-optative, they did constitute a promise of peace in the minds of many positive-minded people on both sides of the divide. It no longer seemed subversive to advocate a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli one. The transfer of some administrative powers to the Palestinian Authority was going ahead. But violent acts - including the assassination of prime minister Yitzak Rabin by a Jewish settler in November 1995 - had damaged confidence.

At that time I had well understood that the activist dialogue between Jewish women and Israeli Palestinian women in Bat Shalom, up there in the Galilee, was a highly unusual phenomenon, calling for political imagination and care. I should perhaps have been unsurprised to find, on my return in 2012, that there was no Bat Shalom at all. The hard worked 'space between' the women of the two communities had become thin air. The northern group had first split from the main organisation in Jerusalem in 2006, changing its name to Bat Zafon (Daughter of the North). Then, in 2008, it disbanded altogether. The Jerusalem office closed two years later. Seeking out the eight or nine former members I could still locate in the *kibbutzim*, in Nazareth and other Arab towns, I tried to uncover what had brought about the demise of their group.

Of course there was simply the attrition of time. We all grow

The Separation Wall defends new Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank and impedes the movement of Palestinians.



Soundings

older, we get tired, we get sick and our activist energy falls away. But more than that, I could hear in their stories a gradual fading of hope. The scale of overt violence between the Israeli Defence Forces, Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south had escalated hugely over the decade. The 'second intifada' in 2000, the renewed invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and the brutal bombardment of Gaza in 2008-9 had been full-scale acts of war, their casualties in the thousands. Imposing the Occupation itself involved daily violence. The relentless militarised Jewish settlement in the West Bank had reduced and fragmented the area 'available' for a Palestinian state. Such a thing was no longer geographically feasible. There was no longer a peace process to support. It was not only Bat Shalom that had faded in this period. The whole Israeli peace movement was in eclipse.

The disillusionment and weariness that led women to withdraw from Bat Shalom had been felt most by the Jewish members. On the *kibbutzim*, attitudes had hardened. The intention of Bat Shalom of the North had always been to be an example in their home communities, to draw more local women into the dialogue. But now these activists felt themselves to be isolated on the *kibbutz*, hated even for seeking contact with 'Arabs'. The closure, for lack of funds, of Bat Zafon's small office in Afula had deprived the group of two full-time activists, and they had not managed to make the transition back to a fully volunteer organisation. However, the Palestinian women, particularly those who were active in the Nazareth branch of the sturdy and long-lived Tandi, the left-wing Movement of Democratic Women, were dismayed by the loss of their Jewish partners. They would have been prepared to continue. Instead, they persisted in their work of empowering Palestinian women and girls, and maintaining contact with those other Palestinians across the Green Line.

Interestingly, in its last few years of life, the northern group had radicalised, strengthened its practice and begun to envision a more daring programme of change in the region. Already, before the outbreak of the intifada in 2000, they had started to work together on annual events to mark Yom al-Ard - Land Day - important to the Palestinian community as marking the moment, in 1976, of the first uprising against the theft of Palestinian land by the Israeli state. It was a bold step for Jews to acknowledge this injustice and join Palestinians in organising around it. On Land Day this year, 2012, I was again in the Galilee. I went to the big rally held by Palestinians in the Arab town of Sakhnin, drawing thousands

When is peace?

of women and men, girls and boys, with massed flags of the political tendencies, the red hammer and sickle for Hadash, the Palestinian tri-colour for the more nationalist Balad. But there was no longer a mixed group of Jewish and Palestinian women with whom to mark the day.

In their last years, some of the women of Bat Zafon had come to be among the few in Israel's peace community who had dared to say openly that a two-state solution was no longer viable. The unthinkable must now be thought: relinquish the singular Jewish identity of Israel. Bat Zafon's women had always been convinced that true democracy within Israel was a necessary condition of a peace settlement in the region. Now they were ready to imagine a multicultural entity or entities across the whole Israel-Palestine region, from the Lebanon and Syrian borders in the north to the Egyptian border in the south, and from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean ocean, a nation of Jews, Palestinians and others in constitutional equality. But this vision gelled only at the moment the individuals of Bat Zafon dispersed and ceased active organising.

'Land Day', 30 March 2012, commemorated in Sakhnin, Galilee. Palestinians gather to protest the expropriation of Palestinian lands by the Israeli state.



Soundings



Former members of Bat Shalom of the North reconsider the days of the 'Oslo Accords' recalled in wall posters using photos and text from my previous visit.

Bat Shalom's failure was symptomatic of the feminist peace movement more generally. It had been an active member of the Coalition of Women for Peace, which, for its part, had often mobilised countrywide action against the Occupation and in support of peace moves. Today the Coalition is misnamed. It has become a single-focus organisation mainly involved in research. Women in Black, which once counted thirty vigils around Israel, has shrunk to three - in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. New Profile, a feminist organisation of women and men, continues its specific work in support of those who refuse military service. There are feminist groups such as Isha l'Isha in Haifa, whose concerns span women's rights, equality, the sex industry and the trafficking of women. But there is no successor project to Bat Shalom of the North, a sustained and tested partnership of Jews and internal Palestinians. Meanwhile, it is protest in the style of 'Occupy' - middle-class Jewish youth incensed by the growing gap between incomes and cost of living - that has taken the place on the city streets once filled by a movement to 'end the Occupation'.

When is peace?

The deferral of 'peace'

War brings untold suffering. But in some of its phases, as feminist students of war and peace processes have often pointed out, it affords some women scope for collective action that they lacked before.⁶ This was the case in Northern Ireland, where the oppression of living in districts beset by street-level strife sparked a defiant working-class feminism. It happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, when foreign funders and feminist activists, appalled by mass rapes, came to partner local women. And it happened in Israel-Palestine, a year into the *intifada*, when Jewish women were propelled into support of Palestinian women by their perception of the intolerable injustice of the Occupation. One form of active response to war that can be seen in the three women's organisations described above is an attempt to create and sustain a dialogue between women defined by the war-makers as enemies. Medica Women's Therapy Centre, the Belfast Women's Support Network and Bat Shalom of the North developed a practice that has since come to be known as 'transversal politics'. An issue of *Soundings* (No 12, Summer 1999) was devoted to this theme. We described it as a creative crossing and redrawing of boundaries that mark significant politicised differences, a process that can 'on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other affirm difference without being transfixed by it'. It is relational *work* that calls for 'empathy without sameness, shifting without tearing up your roots'.⁷

Peace negotiations, however, characteristically overlook women and their transversalist insights. Notwithstanding the scale of sexual violence in the Bosnian war, women's representatives and women's issues were totally absent from that airfield in Dayton, Ohio, where international notables sat down with the war-criminal leaders in negotiations to end the fighting. 'Gender' was only introduced as a policy concern when, some time later, the Office of the High Representative, effective governor of postwar BiH, established a Gender Coordination Group of international agencies to work on equality issues. In the case of Israel-Palestine, not only were there no representatives of women at the table in the Oslo negotiations, the population of Palestinians living within the state of Israel were likewise absent from the talks, their interests in any future settlement ignored.

In Northern Ireland, however, the Good Friday Peace Agreement was the outcome of a more inclusive process, in which women's experience was allowed

Soundings

to make a difference. As the tense discussions proceeded between the political representatives of the British state and the warring parties, a movement in civil society, fostered by the European Union, mobilised to contribute ideas about a future Northern Ireland. The Women's Support Network, in alliance with others in a vibrant women's community sector, women trade unionists and a women's political party (The Women's Coalition) were able to insert themselves and their agenda into this process. The result was an accord that was not merely a truce between fighters but a commitment to a fair and inclusive society, with equality between Catholic and Protestant communities, equality between women and men, and on other grounds besides. As Beatrix Campbell wrote, in her impassioned book *Agreement!*, the Good Friday Agreement was 'a dynamic exemplar of reform democracy for the twenty-first century', embodying 'a transcendent duty to produce more than peace, to begin the millennial work of transforming the sectarian and sexist power relations that structure society'.⁸ A decade and a half later, however, women say the devolved state structures of Northern Ireland are still failing to deliver on the promise. Here, as in Bosnia and Israel-Palestine, women are still asking 'When is peace, actually?'

All photographs taken by Cynthia Cockburn. For more information and more pictures: www.cynthiacockburn.org.

Notes

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2. Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, Zed Books 1998.
3. Helsinki Citizens Assembly with other organisations, *Alternative Report on Implementation of CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Banja Luka, Republika Srpska, BiH, 2010, p41.
4. Sean O'Hagan, 'Belfast, divided in the name of peace', *Observer*, 22.1.12.

When is peace?

5. Lindsay Fergus, 'More Northern Ireland teenagers crossing religious divide to make friends', *Belfast Telegraph*, 16.5.12.
6. For example, Medina Haeri and Nadine Puechguirbal, 'From Helplessness to Agency: Examining the Plurality of Women's Experiences in Armed Conflict', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 92, No 877, March 2010.
7. Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter, 'Introduction: Transversal politics and translating practices', *Soundings* Issue 12, 1999.
8. Beatrix Campbell, *Agreement! The State, Conflict and Change in Northern Ireland*, Lawrence and Wishart 2008. Quotes from pp71 and 57.

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