

## **THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Very little study is made about the role of women in the conflict and in the violence in Northern Ireland. That is the more astonishing, because women do play their role, both in the conflict and in the violence. That we all know about this role and nevertheless discard it as a matter of serious study may be one of the many scapegoating-processes, going on in Northern Ireland. An aspect of the scapegoating of women, especially of working-class women.

The role of the women is, too, a very complicated theme. I will try to make some remarks about the conflict and about the all-pervasive role of violence, to find the common ground on which women play their role. But there are very different women in N.I., so it is necessary to say something about these differences.

The women are never without the men. Their relationship is of paramount interest for our theme. So that is the next, the main point of this article.

In the end I try to say something about the perspectives.

With thanks for Aat van Rhijn, for all the experiences and all the talking we had during years together, in and about Northern Ireland.

### **1. The conflict and the role of violence**

#### **1.1 The conflict**

1.1.1 In principle a conflict always is created by people who are fighting about something, an object, power, in the end the very being of the opponent. The more the conflict is escalating, the more the original issues of the conflict are forgotten. In the end, there is just fighting, just chaos. Each conflict, which is not solved soon and adequately, lands and strands in religion. That is one of the reasons, if not the main reason, why the churches in N.I., are caught up in the vicious circles of violence, trying to prevent it and causing it. This too is the reason, that mythological terms are so easily used in a conflict, may be more easily even in N.I., with its Irish, mythological background.')

1.1.2 When a conflict ended in chaos, peace is regained by the eviction of a scapegoat. When it is impossible to evict the scapegoat (a man, a woman, a child, a group), when the conflicting people have to live with each other, the life of the group sets a new order, a new structure in function of the conflict. The conflict becomes the modus existendi of everybody, belonging to the group, the society that is in conflict. In fact everybody is gaining something out of the conflict, although for an outsider it is very often difficult to see what is the gain at least for some of the participants in the conflict. What is the gain for a victimized child in a family with difficulties? In any case, that the family does not disrupt wholly.

1.1.3 Society, getting a new structure as a result of the “functioning of the conflict destroys in the same time its old structures. Or cause this destruction of structures is going on in the whole world, this destruction is, as in N.I., an aspect of an enormous conflict, but the conflict being so hard and visible as in N.I., in the same time a country with so conservative structures, the consequences for the life of everybody are very big.

‘) For further information about this, see Rene’ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore and London, 1977).

In any case a first result is, that the conflict deepens and becomes even more all pervading. In the long run however just this destructuration may give the possibility to solve the conflict in a creative manner. That women have to play a very big part in this process will hopefully become clear in this article.

Very curiously the churches provoke, by trying to defend the old structures, violence, and make the so complicated conflict worse. Especially the Roman Catholic Church makes the life of very many women, to say the least, difficult, by stressing the traditional role of the wife towards her husband, by defending anti-conception and abortion. That the churches, by doing this, lose their adherence is maybe for the future a pity, but in the moment the least flaw. Being so thorn up as many women are, doing many things with a very bad conscience, is an existential situation, which ends in despair, in violence or in both.

1.1.4 Very roughly there are three groups, with each different roles in the conflict:

1.1.4.1 The politicians. They keep the conflict going. Their place in society is at stake. Life may be hard, but you are important. Whatever their wives say about the situation they are in, notwithstanding the many “other sides of the medal” the situation may have for them, they are, as long as they stay in their position, with their husbands the people who gain in a very special manner from the conflict. They exist through the conflict as much.

It could very well be that they have with their husbands relationships, that are very much the same as the relationships in the marriages of working class people. Much which will be said there, will be true for the politicians’ wives too. In any case, as long as they stick to their place, backing up their husbands, they are provoking violence, taking care with them, that the violence, and so the meaning of life, is going on.

1.1.4.2 The (new) middle group, Roman Catholics and Protestants, mostly living in mixed areas, having (good) relationships with each other, from their study time or through work. Generally and more widely, the people who are not poor, living (more or less) quietly in a society with violence. They are the people who profit from the violence. In fact there are at least “compartments of the heart”, which don’t wish a solution. For all it would mean less affluence, for all, may be, a political solution, which they don’t like.

All are caught up in the circle, in which they occupy the best place. A good life, a good place in society, without being guilty that you have it, without in fact any of your doing. The women are in the same position as the men. Often they have a job of

their own, so making things nicer. The coming to N.I., of modern culture and the conflict, everything works for them.

It is not a question of guilt, not even of responsibility and nevertheless, it is possible to have bad feelings about it. Is this one of the reasons, that many of these women do so much for the group of women, the working class? Much of this work is necessary, if not all of it. Much is admirable, wonderful, and, in the same time, this work again, meant to bring freedom, too and again brings violence. I come back upon that.

1.1.4.3 The working class, the poor. The historical position and the feeling how they are treated and mistreated differ heavily between Roman Catholics and Protestants, but in the conflict they, women and men, are in the same position. They are the scapegoats of society, keeping things going for the others. Here again, there is gain too. All these people become more conscious about themselves, women and men alike, both in very different manners. They are gaining, and in the same time the process goes further. It might even be, that in this group again special groups of persons will be found to be scapegoated, getting the task to perpetuate the conflict.

The only result is then, that the women are more and better scapegoated by their own husbands and sons.

## 1.2 **The role of violence**

1.2.1 Violence is not a “thing”, which some people have and others don’t. Violence is at the foundation of all human culture. The biggest task of culture always was to keep violence down. Violence is all pervading, is always between people. Only, in some circumstances the tension of violence is bigger than in others. So all in N.I. partake in the violence, get their gains and losses from violence. We are all akin.

It might be that the friendliness of N.I. people and especially of N.I. women has to do with this all-pervading violence. I suppose, said a woman to me, that we are so nice, because we are so afraid of the violence in our own heart. We built up our friendliness against our violence, to stay nice. And in the same time, by doing that, we are communicating our violence through our friendliness...And so, although we are so friendly to each other, in the same time there is a hidden tenseness. A fascinating tenseness, which draws us to each other.

1.2.2 Violence is all pervading. We are all in the grip of violence. In the same time we are handling it. We displace the violence to others, weaker than we. The politicians (and their wives) provoke the violence, and let others do the job. The “middle-group” displaces the violence to the “lower groups”. They have their nice theories about the conflict, but they do not any harm to violence. Working-class and poor people, men and women, take care of it. Life is mean. It might be that even the care middle-class women are giving working-class and poor women with their community and all other work is again form of scapegoating, as so much of our help for the third world. If there is not real freedom and equality between the women, the scapegoating and the displacing of the violence to the poor is already going on...

- 1.2.3 This might very well be the case, and notwithstanding that, the women doing this work are right. Are right in any case insofar that they try to change structures, to change the world people are living in.

Violence is always present, and it needs a cause, an ignition to burst out. This ignition is always social, something that happens between men and women, if it is on a small scale or between groups. When the mode of living together does not change, you never can prevent the ignition. Battered women know. In the end precautions never save them from violence. In society things are exactly the same. Only a new life saves from violence.

- 1.2.4 To be sure, it is not wrong, or false, to displace violence. Down in our heart, down in society. Society exists by displacing violence out. To displace it out of our life, for instance to the colonies is not any longer possible, we have to displace it downwards, as long as we don't find better solutions. By doing so, we can get along together, being, eventually very friendly to each other. We can even be friendly to the people we are in the same time scapegoating, middleclass women to working class women.

But there are people who are paying the price. In fact all do, but some, very many, do more than others. In a sense, women especially.

- 1.2.5 In any case, violence is not a quality of certain people. Violence is in between us and we all can become, we all are more or less, more hidden or more openly, violent. Roman Catholics and Protestants, sectarians and non-sectarians. Men and women. Violence springs from the heart of our relationships. And so from the heart of our life. From the family, we grow up in, from our marriage.

## 2. **Women and men in Northern Irish Society**

### 2.1 Introductory remarks

- 2.1.1 The title is much too general. I will try to make remarks about women and men in the working class and about those belong to the poor. I am however rather sure that very much of the following is true too for the other groups in N.I. More or less, something more, some other less, in any case more hidden. But nevertheless.

- 2.1.2 There are surely differences between the Roman Catholics and the Protestant women. Loyalist women are as friendly as Roman Catholics but they don't live in a community as Roman Catholic women do. They are more on their own. They live in a tradition, which leaves more freedom. But, whichever the differences may be, the protestant working-class women are caught up in violence as the Roman Catholic is. They live in neighbourhoods from which the violence comes, are married with, relatives of violent men. They are themselves violent, even if it is, maybe on a smaller scale than Roman Catholic women. So the mechanisms must, as ever, be alike.

- 2.1.3 To prevent misunderstanding: all Northern Irish people, so all Northern Irish women, are violent, because violence is in between them. The difference is, that they handle violence differently. And all are victims, although very clearly working-class women,

who are victimized, are more victim than the victimizers. But all are caught up in the circles. There is very little freedom to escape them. One of the big tasks is, to find the eyes of the needle, through which there is an escape.

2.1.4 Try to order the theme under three headings:

2.2 The mother.

2.3 Woman and men, husband and wife.

2.4 The changing or disappearing of structures.’)

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‘) I used three books, which seems to me important for the subject: Eileen Fairweather, Roisin McDonough and Melanie McFadyean: *Only the rivers run free. Northern Ireland: The women’s war* (London and Sydney, 1984) (abridged: F); Eileen Evason: *Hidden Violence. A study of battered women in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1982) (abr. E) and Marie Abbott and Hugh Frazer (Eds) *Women and community in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1985) (Abr. A).

## 2.2 The mother.

The mother in working class society has a key function in the circles of violence. Very clearly not only there. Which is the function of the mother, and of her representative, the wife, in the life of violence-provoking politicians? Of violence church-men Much too little is known about that. Kuyper, a famous Dutch church leader was converted by an old woman, again a pseudo-mother, and he became a very pious, violent church and statesman.

- 2.2.1 “If the truth were known, Derry (...) was a matrilineal society.” (A38) “We are always a very close family and she was the centre of it – the anchor point.” (F225). Of course there is no news here. In all agrarian societies in Europe the situation was nearly the same: the wife was the boss indoors, the husband outdoors. Things only got worse, when the men lost their old position in society and were driven to the fringe of it. It is in fact not right to call matrilineal because a matrilineal society had a structure in which everybody had his secure place. When the men lose their places, the women become almighty. Then still the situation can be called matrilineal. The daughter is the stand in of her mother, takes her place. The power line is going down, from mother to daughter. The husbands, the sons are just appendices of the tree of power.

Things become worse, when they come in the atmosphere of the sacred and thus, inevitably, of violence. Mrs Paisley (!) says it in her manner: They (i.e. the women fighting for their rights) say they want to be equal to men, but a woman must be on a pedestal to a man so man can look up to her and give her respect.” (F 278). Hence the Rev. Paisley is clearly in the rivalry, preaching: “I believe that the husband is the head of the wife and of the home.” Both are with sacred terms fighting for the power. It might very well be, that she is the winner and that he is driving out the violence of the marriage into politics. I come back upon that. In any case Mrs Paisley is saying what others feel, know, that older women, in fact the mothers, are put on a pedestal (F 206). The admiration, once as a child felt for the mother, stays and is straightaway brought in the circles of violence (F 206).

And it goes further. The mother is brought in the realm of the wonderful, violent Irish mythology, violent as all mythology is violent. Ireland, “this beautiful, tragic woman, this sorrowing mother-figure.” (F 132), surrounded by violence. The philosophy of Cumann na Bhan “boils down to this romantic “Mother Ireland” image.” (F 237). The women cherish their mythological role. Their hearts are in the shrines in which the memory of the martyrs rest. And the reverse: “Beside the ailing and suffering martyr (i.e. in this case the hunger-striker) stood his sorrowful yet resolute wife.” And: “From time immemorial, from their courage (i.e. the mothers and wives) we (the men) draw new strength.” (F 101, 102). This is reflected again by the relationship the prisoners, and especially the hunger-strikers have with their mothers. Although there are fathers too, they never come in the foreground. The media bring the mothers, visiting their sons, taking the decision if the hunger striker has to be fed or not, has to live or to die. Violence, all over. When Fairweather wished to visit prisoners, she goes with the mothers (F 49) “The two men in the bus”, she comments, “seem strangely out of place; visiting prisoners is often thought to be women’s work, part of women’s invisible ‘emotional housework’”. Of course it is far from invisible. The whole community knows. Even a father is present, he is used and put aside by his

wife, the mother (F 39) and in fact it is the mothers who “were noticeably more active than wives.” (F 50).

Prisoners in this war are, so says Fairweather, the mothers, the wives, the children (49). The fathers, husbands again are forgotten. Fairweather is identifying with the culture she is in. And she is right: mothers and sons are together prisoners, caught up in the circle of violence, each with her, his own role. This role is very well visible, as soon as we have the eyes for it. The Rev. Paisley is speaking in Lurgan, January 1986. “Inside (of Lurgan Town Hall), elderly women sit on the front row alongside youngsters in combat jackets (..)” (The Guardian, 13.1.86, 19). When youth attacked a fort “The old women watched, muttering among themselves. ‘There is not enough of them (..)’, calling vandalizing girls of about 20 sentimentally we girls. Sentimentality too always is a cover for violence.

2.2.2 The Position of the mother has an awful price. “Total acceptance of suffering and deprivation is what we were taught.” (F 155). “(..) they unquestioningly accept the role that has been imposed upon them.” (A 47, cf.11, 61). I come back upon that later on. All the violence of the society, of the church, of the men, is laid upon the women, especially the mothers. They are in the deepest pit where human violence can put a human being. And from that position she has power. Power, because violence is part of a relationship. The person down has as much power as the person up. She exercises the power, the violence in an wholly other manner but she does. All in the circle are in the same time agents and victims.

2.2.3 The relationship with the children is so important for our theme, that we have to come back upon it. They are, that is wholly clear, of paramount interest for the mother. She feels responsible for them, still when they are grown up (F 112, and see 2.2.1). In fact the mother and the children form, more or less and probably very often, a symbiosis, a belonging together without clear divisions, clear lines between them. That is true for the daughters and for the sons. The consequences are devastating. Every symbiosis is full of violence. All the partners in the symbiosis wish to stay in it and to get out of it. It is, in all peacefulness, a constant fight. The violence of it is displaced to the outside. In Northern Ireland all too easy into the troubles.

One of the very important consequences is further, that the children are not able to live in a real marriage. They repeat in the marriage the relationships they were in in childhood, with again as consequence endless suffering and violence.

The thinking of Julia Kristeva, especially in *Histoires d’Amour*, throws possibly some more light upon the situation. She tries to show that the dices for a life are thrown already before the Oedipal period. The child is with the mother and discovers that it can’t be that important for her as she is for him. There are others. So the child stays totally dependent on the mother and it learns to hate her, because she is not the person she should be for him. In the meeting of the father the child learns how to be a person who people live and so it finds equilibrium, self-esteem, all the things we need in life. The working class boy in Northern Ireland all too often does not meet his father at all. There is in fact no father. There only is an older brother, if there is at all such a person. And so he stays caught in the dependency-hate-relationship with the mother the whole of his life. With, as a consequence, the atmosphere of the sacrum, the mythology, the violence. It all belongs together. That under these circumstances

there are IRA men, alienated from the church, who spent a lot of time in church, praying (F 254) is only a consequence of the situation. They are back in the womb of the mother, with a gun in their pockets.

## 2.3 **Women and men. Husband and wife.**

2.3.1 The girl came (maybe it was in the past, but it is not sure that things are generally better now) into her marriage with a dream. She knew in the same time, that it probably only was a dream, that reality would come very soon. She knew this reality. A reality of hardship, with the task to be the central point in the family. With the responsibility, for the often many children, she would not be able to leave. With a husband, who probably would be as all the husbands, at best bringing money home and not caring. With no freedom at all to give her own life a chance, because society, the church and all the men exactly knew how she had to be, to handle and to be handled. A world in which she tried to be cleverer than all these tyrant trying to use anti-contraceptive, to provoke abortion and smaller or bigger things to reach a goal. She didn't expect much from men she had more pity than expectation. A subtle form of scapegoating in response of the overt scapegoating by all against her. A world full of violence amidst of miracles of dedication.

The man too came with a long experience. They went along with their sisters as later on with their wives and the mothers just gave in (F 163). It was the only world she knew. The girl has to stay in her place down there (F 160). In fact what will go on later on, in marriage, is already beginning. The men are terrified by the almighty women. If he breaks a cup, she, the almighty, must be the cause (F 71). If she looks in a certain manner at him, the only possibility for him is to defend himself with violence (F 71). He wishes to dominate and humiliate the, his women (E 14, 16). Of course, Evason is showing the extremes, but structurally her "cases" show the structure of the relationship.

Men are helpless in situations in which character is needed to stand up in them. They use violence or they fly (cf F 154). There is a solidarity of the man against women (E 37) Husbands may use power they have as members of a paramilitary organisation to control their wives (e 73). As a woman it is extremely difficult, when your husband is hitting you, to get help of the police (E 73). The para's give him a hand (A 42). This coalition of men against women, which always is in the direction of violence, is the more curious, because the men are in the same time jealous, very jealous, very much rivaling. It is an alliance of boys against mothers, every boy being very keen that his mother only is his and nobody's elses.

2.3.2 The man comes into the marriage with the traditional knowing, or is it a wish for the fulfillment of which he has to fight all the time?, that he will be boss, simply is the boss. And she acknowledges him in that cf F 174/5). He is in front, she is in the back, she supports him (F 239). Of course it is a myth, with all the violence myth contains. She is in his back, and in front of him. She is in his back, pushing him into violence, the violence of their relationship.

With the beginning of marriage begins the struggle. He forbids her to use contraception (E 57, 71 etc.). He wishes that she becomes pregnant and so she loses her freedom and becomes dependant. (F 121). In the same time pregnancy is often a



reason to batter the wife (E 26-28), F 158). By reaching his goal, making his wife pregnant, he loses in the same time his place, which the children take. As ever the carrying axes in the family is between mother and children. He is outside, mentally and geographically. The trauma, losing his mother, is repeated. And so violence, although mostly it is only tensions, is again there. In West Belfast there are prisoner's wives living with other men, the neighbourhood agreeing. They were never anything worth for their families, is the common opinion.

The fight is about everything. About money, about the worth of the female body (F 161), about power. The position of the women is hopeless. The church, society, the male world, all have a conspiracy against her. She is totally victimized. If she resists, she is always wrong. "Beneath the moralizing, Christianity itself worships violence", says a woman (F 136). It is certainly true. The church promotes, by her laws, violence in the families and so in society. And nevertheless, the hopeless position is in a structure, and so there must be a reverse. The woman is the stable part of the relationship, the "pillar". A very curious aspect of that is, that she has very often no orgasms, and so she stays the same. He has his orgasm, he has his pleasure, but she, having none, stays herself. Orgasm in a relationship means that both come in a kind of deconstruction, out of which they come in a new form, a little bit changed by each other. She has no orgasm, he has. There is not a common experience, adventure. She stays herself, he is losing himself becoming more unsure, becoming more trapped in violence. In any case, he is not better off. He is in an awful plight. In fact he is not fighting with his wife, to have the power, he is, fundamentally, fighting with her, to have herself, her being. He is trapped in metaphysical desire. He is fighting an impossible fight, wishing to have with the whole of his being what he can't get, which evades him time and again, as the mother once evaded the child. And so he is extremely jealous (E 20, 33, 59 etc., etc.), fearing to lose forever. When he has become violent, he is terribly sorry (E 58, 62), fearing to lose his hope. He is fighting for power and losing by fighting. He loses his place by making his wife pregnant and so in the same manner all the strategies achieve exactly the opposite of what was meant.

The fight brings him more and more outside of the house. The relationship with his wife is so filled with fears, attraction and hatred, that with his children so ambivalent, that he can't do any good. The wife takes over inside, he outside. Outside he is very nice, but the violence is thus, as with all nice people, always in the neighbourhood.

- 2.3.3 The relation between husband and wife is a system, consisting of "complex, interlocking, hostile dependencies between the partners" (E 9), in which "the victim is trapped with the aggressor" (E 11). It looks like a power-system, but the violence comes from deeper levels, from the being itself. Both are responsible for the system and both take care that it stays, both doing in the same time their utmost to break it. In very subtle ways, mostly by her, and very hard ways, mostly by him, the system is reinforced. Seen from the inside, she has the power and is powerless, from the outside, he has the power and is powerless.

\*) See for this Rene' Girard: Deceit, Desire and the Novel (Baltimore and London, 1965).

It is a relationship without a structure, for it, which gives a place and freedom. Husband and wife are very near to each other. There is no real partition of rights and duties. She has all the duties and no rights, he all the rights and no duties. Both can be for each other god and devil and mostly everything in the same time. So there are very big fears in the relationship and no possibilities to solve them. Because it is such a tight system without structure, in the short run nothing can be done to change things. When things go wrong, then the onlookers feel and are helpless.

In any case, although she is the victim, of everybody, in the house she is the strongest. The weaker is always the violent one in a relationship and in the end he is on the run. Bringing violence in the streets. In Northern Ireland there are plenty possibilities to be violent with a not too bad conscience.

### 2.3 **The changing and disappearing of societal structures.**

- 2.4.1 The old societal structures weren't that nice for girls and women, but in any case they gave some protection. "For girls however, the old forms of protection increasingly no longer exists. More and more find themselves being treated on the wrong side of the virgin/whore divide." (F 149). When boys and girls meet, there is not only the fear of the boys that the girls will achieve something for themselves, there is "sexual tension and aggression." (F 152).

In this ongoing process, the rivalry becomes bigger and bigger and inevitably there comes a macho-atmosphere (A 64) The fascination through violence, the manner in which girls and boys, women and men become gods and devils for each other. This is especially true for the relationship between boys and girls in gangs, a form of violence which is caused by the bigger violence of the country, in which the fascination by each other, in fact the fascination by violence becomes very clear (F 32, 147). In the end there is the chaos of promiscuity under the pressure of the violence (F 171).

The disintegration of structures, of culture, a cause of much violence throughout the western world, with the subsequent canonization with new violence, is a circle in which people come nearer and nearer to each other, with the unfailing consequence of new violence.

The same is clear in the families. The children become more violent, so learning their lessons for the future.

- 2.4.2 A very interesting question is, which is the influence on the violence of men if his wife is either agreeing or not agreeing with his violence. The men are wishing that she is behind his back. It could be, that he is more reckless and senseless violent, when she disagrees. That he is more planning his violence, when he feels her, agreeing behind him. But here again there is a very curious circle. Martyrdom is a precious tradition in Irish mythology. The choice between being the wife of a bastard for you and your children or the widow of a martyr can be a very difficult one.

In any case, women have always been involved, one time more, one time less, but always. Mostly in the background, but there too, things are changing. Now they are

seen encouraging violence. They carry guns. They are involved in supporting vigilante activities