

Women's Vision in Transition





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Women's Vision in Transition

- a re-visualisation of the Tigers Bay and New Lodge areas of North Belfast by women who live there

Context

The conflict in Northern Ireland, also known as 'The Troubles', refers to a 30-year period of violence from 1968-1998 between British security forces and loyalist and republican paramilitaries over the constitutional status of the six county region that resulted in the deaths of almost 3700 people. The Good Friday Agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement, signed in Belfast on Good Friday, 10th April 1998, was viewed as a major step forward in the Northern Irish peace process when consensus was reached between the British and Irish governments and loyalist and republican paramilitaries concerning its system of governance and relationship with Britain and the Republic of Ireland (Dawson, 2007). The agreement put in place the devolved power-sharing assembly that now sits at Stormont in Belfast. It recognises the right of Northern Irish citizens to hold either British, Irish or dual national identity and moved towards demilitarisation and democratic principles, where any change to its constitutional status as a part of the United Kingdom should be decided by the majority of the populations in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Northern Ireland continues to be perceived as a region with two dominant identity groups framed as Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist and Catholic-Nationalist-Republican. Despite being more than 20 years post the Good Friday Agreement, many communities, particularly in North Belfast, continue to live in segregated areas of the city with some populations being almost exclusively Catholic or Protestant. It is these communities that experienced the highest levels of violence during the Troubles and continue to experience the highest levels of deprivation (Fay et al, 1999, NISRA, 2017). These regions of the city are often in very close proximity to one another, with sometimes only a single street demarcating where one area begins and another ends. Tigers Bay and New Lodge is one such 'interface' area of North Belfast. Only two miles outside of the city centre, Tigers Bay is a predominantly Protestant area covering about two square miles that has a population of approximately 2000 people. New Lodge is a predominantly Catholic area covering around six square miles with a population of approximately 7000 people. Duncairn Gardens is a main road with local shops, businesses and services used by both communities that runs between both areas. Gated entries, or 'peace walls' run along either side of Duncairn Gardens providing access for local residents whilst at the same time maintaining a physical barrier between each community. The gated entries are timed; opening at 7am and closing at 5.30pm. A surveillance camera controlled by local police monitors the remote operation of a security gate. On the New Lodge side, local business holders and residents act as keyholders and are responsible for locking and unlocking the entries.

In late 2014, a group of women who live in Tigers Bay and New Lodge came together to offer visual representations of their localities as a means of highlighting issues affecting interface areas of the post-conflict city. A key critique of the Northern Ireland peace process agenda has been the exclusion of women in its formation and implementation (Ward, 2013). Whilst this photobook has been created in a post-conflict context and highlights women's experiences within their own locality, its primary focus is encouraging women to become proactive agents in addressing the legacy of the Troubles, thereby promoting the inclusion of their vision in the political public sphere. It began with a chance meeting at a conference on women's contribution to the peace process in Northern Ireland between Eileen Weir (funded by TEO Greater North Belfast Good Relations and the Community Relations Council) of Shankill Women's Centre and Dr Jolene Mairs Dyer, a practice-led researcher at Ulster University. Eileen is a community worker who aims to increase the political engagement of women living in Greater North Belfast. Jolene's primary interest is using creative visual practice as a tool to promote peace-building and as a tool in representing marginalised communities. Eileen suggested working with Lower North Belfast Women's Group in Tigers Bay and Star Neighbourhood Centre in New Lodge. Several meetings later, *Women's Vision from Across the Barricades* (the title chosen by the women themselves) began. The photobook was officially launched by Dawn Purvis at Duncairn Centre for Culture and Arts in October 2015. It is now held in the Linen Hall Library in Belfast and in the Tate Britain's Library and Archives in London as part of their prestigious Martin Parr photobook collection.

In October 2020, the group met once more to review progress since we published 'Women's Vision from Across the Barricades' in 2015. This photobook, 'Women's Vision in Transition,' demonstrates what is possible when women work together to address socio-economic issues affecting their localities. It also shows how women's voices can be made more visible and audible in the public sphere, challenging their on-going exclusion from local power structures.

This project is innovative in that it adopts collaborative protocols inspired by the work of Prof Cahal McLaughlin and his work on the *Prisons Memory Archive* (www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com) whereby ownership of this photobook is shared between Shankill Women's Centre, Lower North Belfast Women's Group, Star Neighbourhood Centre and the Centre for Media Research at Ulster University. This means that we remain accountable to one another in terms of the creation and distribution of this photobook. These photographs confirm what we have achieved, but also highlight issues that this group of women wish to be taken forward. In a wider political culture of promoting external investment and economic growth in Northern Ireland, it is essential those communities most affected by the conflict remain central to addressing its legacy. This photobook aims to play a role in ensuring that this remains the focus of the post Good Friday Agreement political agenda.

Dr Jolene Mairs Dyer, November 2020
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Photographers

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Housing





The image on the left shows an area of derelict land in Hogarth Street in Tigers Bay in 2014. We stated 'houses were pulled down from this area (...) over 10 years ago with the promise of new houses going up. This is a disused space that could be used for social housing.' The picture on the right, taken in September 2020, shows that our aim of ensuring this space is re-purposed for social housing has been achieved.





The image on the left shows also shows Hogarth Street in 2014. We stated, 'From April onwards each year this derelict area is used as a bonfire site.' The picture on the right shows that this has now been re-purposed for social housing, as we proposed.





The image on the left shows Halliday's Road in Tigers Bay in 2014. We stated, 'These derelict houses (...) have been empty for over 10 years. We would like to see these renovated for much-needed social housing.' The picture on the right shows that our aim has been achieved.





The image on the left was taken in New Lodge in 2014. We stated, 'This row of derelict housing in New Lodge is under re-development; however, the houses towards the top of the street will not be re-built for another 7-10 years, despite being in the same dilapidated condition'. The image on the right shows how the speed of re-development in streets such as this has significantly improved as we suggested.



This image taken in New Lodge in 2020 shows the ‘houses towards the bottom of the street’ mentioned on the previous page. This shows how the speed of re-development in New Lodge has significantly improved as we suggested.

Public Space





The image on the left shows a children's play park in Tigers Bay in 2014. We stated, 'We do not agree with paramilitary flags being flown here as young children use this facility every day.' The picture on the right shows the same play park today. All paramilitary flags have been removed since the publication of our photobook in 2015.

Barricades





The image on the left, taken in 2014, shows the only gate monitored by a surveillance camera used to go in and out of Tigers Bay. The image on the right is the same gate in 2020, which is still monitored and opens at 7am and closes at 5.30pm. This means that local residents have to walk an extra half mile to use the shops after the gates close. Whilst we wouldn't like to see the gate removed entirely, we would prefer that the opening hours be extended and that it is re-designed to look less intimidating. This would be achieved by consultation between statutory bodies and local residents.

Women's Services





In 2014 we wrote, ‘The Corner House in New Lodge was once a thriving cross-community family centre that was used by people from both areas. It provided much-needed childcare and youth services. It gradually lost its funding and closed about seven years ago.’ As of September 2020, The Corner House remains unused and derelict. It could be re-purposed for much-needed women-centred services such as a crèche, childcare or educational services.

Since we conducted our visual survey in 2014 and published our photobook 'Women's Vision from Across the Barricades' in 2015, significant improvements that we suggested and lobbied for have been made in Tigers Bay and New Lodge, particularly in relation to housing; however, there are still significant issues that need to be addressed:

Women's services

- There is still the need for a shared, safe space for women living in Tigers Bay and New Lodge to come together.
- There is still the need for women-centred services, activities and educational opportunities that service all local communities such as a crèche, childcare and youth facilities.
- There is still the need for re-investment in facilities such as The Corner House that could help provide these much-needed services.

Representation and inclusion of women in positions of power

There is still a lack of women in local power structures, which means we continue to be excluded from key decision-making forums. This needs to be addressed urgently by encouraging and providing the support and services necessary for women to be able to access, and participate in, local power structures.

Consultation

There remains the need for local authorities and political representatives to engage in proper, meaningful consultation with all communities when making decisions about our areas.

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