

## Chapter 6

# 'Sometimes it would be nice to be a man': negotiating gender identities after the Good Friday Agreement

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The politics of identity in Northern Ireland has received considerable academic attention and yet, despite the saturation of such studies, the focus is overwhelmingly (and understandably) on the ethno-national divide. The significance of Protestant and Catholic, British, Irish and Northern Irish identities preoccupies the academic imagination, at the expense, one might argue, of different or intersectional identities. Subsequently, inequality in relation to gender, 'race' and 'other' ethnicities, sexuality and, to a lesser extent, class receive far less attention, not only from academic study but in media coverage as well. Feminist research tends to focus solely on women's position vis-à-vis the conflict, with gender often acting as the subtext for ethno-nationalism (Ashe, 2008; Zalewski, 2005). Gender, as opposed to 'gender and conflict', is rarely explored, thereby affording a partial view of the way in which women situate themselves as *women* in Northern Ireland – not just *women in conflict*. Our understanding of identity<sup>1</sup> construction and change in the six counties is partial and, more specifically, little is known of the ways in which women negotiate

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1 I feel it important to clarify that I regard identities as fluid, ever-changing and, most importantly, intersectional. When using 'gender' as an analytical category and trying to determine its significance in the everyday lives of women, the concept of intersectionality becomes of utmost importance (see also chapter 9). Crenshaw (1989) in particular has drawn our attention to the need to account for the ways in which gender intersects with race and ethnicity as a means of creating awareness of identity and how such can be a source of oppression. This also extends to categories such as class, sexuality, age and so forth. The evidence collected in the Contemporary Irish Identities Project (see footnote 2) supports this argument, in that many women articulated their gender identity as significant in relation to other identity categories, or in the context of discussing other elements of their identity. Methodologically speaking, this offers important insight into the ways in which scholars might undertake the study of gender identity, yet a rigorous statement on such is beyond the confines of this chapter.

their subject positions vis-à-vis gender. This, in turn, has ramifications for recognising and challenging gender-based inequalities.

Champions of equality were excited by the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998 due to the specific inclusions with regard to human rights and equal opportunities. Despite the jubilation by some – most notably members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition – at the inclusion of measures of equality (Fearon and Rebouche, 2006), with the passing of well over a decade since the signing of this historic accord, it has done little to change the position of women in Northern Ireland. Women continue to be marginalised from formal politics, as they are grossly under-represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly, in 2011 totalling just twenty out of the 108 members, despite the enactment of positive discrimination legislation designed to counteract such imbalances (Side, 2007; see also chapter 7). Women remain concentrated in low-paid, casual employment, do the majority of unpaid care work and continue to be the most likely to be in poverty (Breitenbach and Galligan, 2004; Farrell *et al.*, 2008; Moore *et al.*, 2002). Women's right to abortion is still very much curtailed in the north as it is offered only in the case of serious medical and physical complications for the woman and/or foetus, and so many women to travel to the UK seeking abortions. Violence against women continues to be an issue, as police statistics show a yearly increase in incidents of domestic violence, with 24,482 incidents reported for 2009/10, an increase of 891 on the previous year, the overwhelming majority of victims being female (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2010). The lack of substantial progress in the area of women's equality raises the following questions: To what extent are women in Northern Ireland aware of their gender identity? How does gender get articulated in their everyday lives? What do Northern Irish women have to say about being female? To what degree is gender a salient category of identity? Do clearly articulated gender identities translate into an awareness of gender-based inequalities? How does gender get articulated in ways that are different to ethno-national and class-based identities? While these are rudimentary questions in the general field of identity politics and, in many ways, a crude way to conceptualise identity, it is a necessary starting point from which to begin exploring gender identity in Northern Ireland.

The research upon which this chapter is based is significant in this regard, as it sheds light on gender as an analytical identity category in the context of a changing, yet still deeply unequal, Northern Ireland. Through an analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews conducted as part of the Contemporary Irish Identities Project it is possible to establish the ways in which gender identities are meaningful.<sup>2</sup> The interviews

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<sup>2</sup> The Contemporary Irish Identities Project was part of the Identity, Diversity and Citizenship programme at University College Dublin and funded by the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, III; the principal investigators were Jennifer

analysed in this chapter were conducted with women of varying ages and social backgrounds, although working-class women are predominantly represented. There is a balance, however, in terms of those who identify as either Protestant or Catholic. The findings indicate that while meaning in relation to gender identity is not as easily articulated as that in relation to ethno-national or class identity, it does nevertheless hold some salience. Interestingly, discussions of gender identity were often less comfortable than those which concerned class and ethno-national identity. In this chapter, I suggest that this is connected to the content of and relative weights given to the three dominant categories in discourse. The narratives of the women interviewed clearly show that, on some level, gender differentiation and dominant gender practices are naturalised, which is in sharp contrast to perceptions of ethno-national and class-based identities. While some women acknowledged the existence of gender-based inequalities there is also evidence of a willingness to relinquish agency over hierarchical gender relations by some of the women. This creates an observable paradox between the articulation of gender differences and denial of transformative potential. More specifically, to see unequal gender practices as fixed has significant implications for any attempt at resisting them. Even when women identified a potential for change, this was accompanied by a hesitancy and sense that any transformation would be piecemeal. The data suggest that challenging gender-based inequalities will continue to be difficult as long as there is a predominant emphasis on ethno-national identity and that such emphasis remains institutionalised in the structures of governance.

## Discerning gender difference from childhood

The initial conversations on gender tried to ascertain how women in Northern Ireland understand their gender identity – in particular in relation to men and what they perceive to be the main differences between men and women. For many women in the study, when asked of their first recollection of gender difference or awareness of being female, any articulation of such difference was a difficult task. Many could not recall when they became aware of gender difference and not a single respondent could pinpoint a single event, action or circumstance which brought to light an awareness of being female. This sits in stark contrast

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Todd, John Coakley, Tom Inglis and Alice Feldman. I was a postdoctoral researcher on the project between 2003 and 2005 and conducted over 150 interviews during this time as part of the post. These in-depth, face-to-face interviews were completed in three different locations on the island of Ireland, one of which was a town on the east coast of Northern Ireland. This chapter is based on the interviews with women in Northern Ireland only – a total of eighteen interviews.

to ethno-national identity, where many women could recall with ease particular moments of initial awareness of being British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, for example. Unlike ethno-national identity and, to a lesser extent class, many women expressed a sense of their gender difference as something that was always there, omnipresent from their earliest childhood memories, that the sense of difference was innate. Several women explained this through the presence of older brothers in the family, which effectively demarcated gender from the very beginning of their lives, but the point at which they recall awareness of this is unknown. So while these particular women know gender difference is there, pinpointing when it became known is not possible. Just two women referenced gender to biological difference, while the majority saw their sense of gender difference as being attributable to social roles and expectations. Denise, a single, self-defined middle-class teacher in her late twenties, recalled how social pressure operated to police her interests and activities:

I played with boys' toys as well you know.... I like football, I like Formula One; those are very non-girl-orientated sports. Friends of mine would argue that ... you know, female friends I should say would be sort of 'Why do you like that?', 'Why do you watch football?' 'You don't really like it, you're just doing it to fit in', because when I was younger I had a lot of male friends, and when I began to get to know them they find it sort of strange that I like football and Formula One as well. So it's as if people like to categorise you into nice, neat little boxes.

Similarly, Sally, a retired upper-middle-class artist, expressed how naturalised expectations around gender were for her when she was young:

Well you're always aware of it because you're aware of it from PE, even different changing [rooms], even at school, primary school, you were doing PE and the girls would and the boys, you know, you would be segregated so you are very much aware of your gender.... There would be jobs the boys did and jobs the girls did and my mother would have been very old fashioned. I had to do a lot of work around the house and the one I hated and that was from a very early age was polishing my brother's shoes and that was a gender thing and I was very adamant that I shouldn't be picked on to do that. The boys should, but it never worked. I had to do it. So I was aware of it very early on but my mother had this set role that a woman was a homemaker and should be doing all these things in the house, taught to iron and do all these things. Of course the boys could be outside with hens and with different things so my role was supposedly in the house. I always objected [laughs]. So I do remember.

Sally's awareness of the gendered division of labour within the home is a tangible example of the ways in which many women become acutely aware of gender. Embedded in this are notions of femininity and masculinity which further entrench and naturalise gender as a state of being.

For some women, when expectations around the 'appropriate' performance of gender conflicts with personal expression, gender awareness

becomes more acute. Janine, a working-class woman in her early thirties who was a single parent until recently, reported that she was very much aware of expectations for her to dress a certain way and act in a fashion appropriate for her gender:

I used to say I wanted to be a boy when I was younger! Sure, I was always in tracksuit bottoms and I was always bogging and out on the skateboards. So I was never a girlie girl.

Janine's relationship with gender norms is very conflictual – on the one hand, she claims to have had the freedom not to be a 'girlie girl', yet she is also very much aware of the constraints placed on her by society. Her resentment of these gender norms is highlighted in her desire for freedom to express herself in masculine ways – and to be a boy. Despite her claims of rejecting the 'feminine', she nevertheless continued to feel constricted as she received criticisms for her choices and behaviour.

## The situated meaning of gender

In light of the above discussion, it is perhaps no surprise that when talking about differences between women and men, respondents identified social roles as those that ascribe meaning to their gender. The negotiation of gender identities in everyday life revolves, for many of the women I spoke to, around what traditionally constitutes 'feminine'. For some this means connecting femininity with motherhood. With the exception of one woman, those who spoke about motherhood and gender did so in relation to the role of the mother within the home and her ability to be a good carer. As Deirdre, a fifty-year-old working-class librarian and self-described feminist explained,

I always think that the family revolves around the mother, you know, no matter what happens. It's just always the way.

She continued by stating that the mother is the mainstay of the home and that women will always be better at this than men.

Some women made direct links between their current sense of their gendered self and the expectations and contradictions they face in their own life with regard to femininity and career choice or sense of self-expression. Denise, the single teacher in her late twenties, located her sense of self in the realm of the social and what is expected and required of her as a woman:

In terms of gender identity it's ... I've been socialised to be ... I've been taught that I am female. Psychologically, I am female, although possibly more tomboy at times [laughs]. I wouldn't be, to be female, again it comes down to really the differences between males and females. There's things I can do as female that males can't do and vice versa. Why I identify myself

as being female is mainly biological to begin with and psychological in terms of the sorts of professions that I would be offered or sort of guided towards, sort of going to occupational therapy or physiotherapy or 'Do you not want to be a nurse?'

Much like Denise, Janine's sense of her own gender identity is very much wrapped up in her awareness of the discord between what femininity should entail and how she chooses to express it:

I was never a girlie girl or – I am definitely not a – I was going to say I am not a woman – I am not a girlie woman. If I was going out for a night out I would dress up but I am not big into wearing skirts and the makeup I have got on me now is what you would see me in at the weekends, you know, I am not big into women's things.... I have got a pair of heels upstairs and I wear them, for all we ever go out I would wear them once in a blue moon – I would usually wear my wee flat trainers going out or a pair of flip flops! ... People want to wear high heels to make them look taller and make them look slimmer and they wear the wee pointy shoes because it is more ladylike.

Janine went on to talk about the pressures on both men and women to fit into a gender ideal. She believes women are becoming even more feminine through their consumption of products to feminise and 'improve' the female body. She also believes that masculinity is experiencing a similar process, in that a space has opened up for masculine men to consume cosmetics and products such as hair gel, fake tan and moisturisers. What is perhaps quite striking in this narrative is the lack of class analysis by Janine. Given her class position, one would expect that an articulation of class identity would arise in tandem with gender – that the intersection of class and gender would be evident. This woman was, for a period of time, a single mother with two young boys living in a very working-class area, yet issues around the gendered nature of work (both paid and unpaid) did not surface; nor was there mention of the unequal nature of childcare responsibilities.

It would appear that gender difference is, in some ways, difficult for many of these women to articulate because, as they point out, it is naturalised to such a degree from the early stages of life that it becomes seen as something ordinary, unremarkable, accepted even. This, to be sure, has implications for the ways in which women perceive gender inequality as an issue in their lives, and in Northern Irish society in general, as the next section explains.

## Awareness of gender inequality

The significance of the above narrative for understanding gender identities and, most importantly, for building a politics around the same is made clearer when looking at how these women connect gender

difference to gender inequality. The women interviewed, for the most part, are aware of the social norms which police their behaviour, clothing choices, career paths and general self-expression. Many women also made connections between their individual experiences of pressure in relation to gender performance and a more structural, systematic gender inequality. Awareness of a pervasive sense of gender inequality surfaced in three distinct ways: as a tangible yet fixed phenomenon; as tangible but changeable; and as more significant for Northern Irish men than women.

### *Gender inequality as natural and fixed*

Several women talked at length about gender inequality in Northern Ireland as an observable social reality. On a number of occasions a connection was made with other elements of their identity, particularly social class. While acknowledging that gender inequalities are significant, for a number of the women they were nonetheless perceived as naturalised and, as a result, unchangeable. Renee, a lone parent in her mid-thirties who works as a childminder, was particularly aware of the intersection of class and gender and how, as a single mother, it serves to further her inequality. When asked if it is harder to be a woman than a man in Northern Ireland at present she responded:

I think it's a man's world when it comes to single parents because the men can walk away ... Gemma's dad sees her once a year – his choice not mine – you know, she could go over as many times as he wanted her [to].... Men walk away and leave all the responsible things to the women; in my eyes that's what happens. You know some men, don't get me wrong, some men like Richard [current partner] whose ex-partner will not let him near the son and he would do so much for the child you know and the child wants to see him. That's bad but I think in general I think it's harder for the woman definitely.

The care responsibilities expected of Renee in comparison with those of the father of her child have made her acutely aware of how her freedoms and choices are greatly affected by her gender. She believed things have changed slightly in comparison with previous generations and recalled how difficult it was for women in 'her mother's day' in terms of women's ability to work outside the home. Ultimately, however, she believed that inequality will never fully disappear.

I think some men are taking on more responsibilities but I don't think they'll ever change. I think it will always be a man's world; they'll always get the better-paid jobs, you know they'll always get 'em. Men go out whenever they please, you know; the women sit in the house worried about making dinner, doing the washing, cleaning the house, feeding the kids. Maybe not changing then, just staying the same, just like to think it's changing.

Similar sentiments were echoed in Maria's narrative. Maria is a single mother in her thirties, a part-time hairdresser and from a similar social class as Renee. She said she is very conscious of gender inequality through her position as a lone parent as well as in her workplace:

From my work point of view our men all have company cars and pensions where we don't ... men get higher-paid jobs and ... sometimes ... they're [women] doing the same job as the men.

In her position as a single mother she feels particularly strong about the presence of gender inequality in Northern Irish society:

Yeah, I mean, it's me that pays for childminders; the father gets off scot-free. Maintenance money is a joke and getting it off him is another joke, you know, when he can swan about in his fancy car and his fancy house and you know wouldn't pay a penny for Stuart and doesn't. As I say he's changing school this year and I didn't get a penny towards the school uniform but yet he can go out and buy a shirt for maybe a hundred odd pound you know so that way there's [inequality] ... I don't like that either you know but.

Maria is quite fatalistic about this – as signified by the 'but' at the end of the sentence she does not finish. Her 'but' intimates a sense that nothing can be done to change the situation. She feels that she has no choice but to accept the gender order, much like Renee.

Deirdre is an interesting inclusion in this group. As mentioned above, she is a fifty-year-old working-class librarian and the sole self-described feminist in the study. While it is not surprising that Deirdre could easily identify ways in which gender inequality takes shape in her life and in broader Northern Irish society, it is surprising that, as a feminist, she too sees such inequality as fixed. She discussed at length the striking gender inequality in her male-dominated workplace. Yet within the home, she views gender inequality to be naturalised. While she insisted there was an equal division of labour within her home she concluded by saying:

I am not sure, well you would still.... The mother of the house I always think would be the mainstay. You know? Even if you didn't work, and your husband worked, I always think that the family revolves around the mother, you know, no matter what happens. It's just always the way.... I do I think it all revolves around the mother no matter how good the father is.... We have a great set-up here, we have both, we both do equal amounts in here. It's great, but then again, you'll still do it no matter what, no matter whether it's equal, or the amount of work that you are doing in the house. A woman will always do something extra, you know.... It's always gonna be like that no matter what. You know? That you will always do that wee bit extra.

So while Deirdre acknowledged that inequalities do exist, she appears willing to accept them despite her feminist tendencies.



### *Gender inequality as changeable*

A more promising analysis of gender inequality was offered by a much smaller number of women who recognised not only the extent to which such inequality impinges on their lives but also the potential to challenge and change it. Sarah is a single mother in her late thirties who works as a care assistant while studying for a PhD. She was cognisant of the changes that have taken place in Northern Ireland with respect to the position of women and cautiously optimistic that things will continue to improve, despite the fact that inequalities still remain.

It's becoming easier, so it is. I think again your sort of more traditional roles, sort of the woman stays at home and looks after the children. Certainly, we're still a fair bit behind sort of like England, you know, in that sense you know, more opportunities for women to work their way up job-wise but it's become easier I think in a way. I think maybe twenty/twenty-five years ago maybe it wouldn't have been as easy for me to go to university and whatnot. But there's still, I think there's still, you know, the barriers for women to a certain degree. In jobs there's obviously a preference for men in certain jobs, so there is.

While Sarah identified scope for change, she also demonstrated awareness of concrete barriers. Coupled with the fact that only one other woman expressed a similar observation, the cautious optimism is certainly not indicative that there is any hope among the women in the study for tangible change in the near future. It is perhaps worthy of note that Sarah had personally experienced greater opportunity over the years. As she was now doing a PhD it is perhaps not surprising that she saw that change had taken place.

### *Hegemonic masculinity, men and inequality*

A number of women raised the issue of gender inequality in relation to the difficulties men face in Northern Ireland. These women felt it was harder to be a man in the north than a woman, due to the aggressive relationships between men, something which is more acutely pronounced due to the conflict. Two women cited pressures placed on men by hegemonic masculinity and its policing of male behaviour, predominantly in the form of male-on-male violence. As one, Heather, a married working-class woman in her early forties, explained:

I think it's easier to be a woman.... My husband will agree ten times over. I can go out down the town on a night out with my friends and I'm ten times safer than what he would be going out on a night with his friends. I'm safer going out with my friends than I am going out with him ... because the amount of times ... I've walked up town at night by myself on my own, no problem. But if I walked up with him there's always some loser wanting to start a fight or ... bored or ... 'What are you looking at?' and we wouldn't be looking at anybody and it's ... definitely safer on my own.

Renee, while clearly aware of the inequalities she faces as a single mother as outlined above, similarly noted that men in Northern Ireland face threats to their physical safety, not only through male-on-male violence but also in attempts to recruit men into paramilitary organisations:

I think it's harder to be a man ... I definitely think so because a woman can ... walk up the town at night time and not feel too scared. A man can walk up the town and get hammered for the sake of his religion; they don't really do it to women. It's a rare occasion if they do it to women but men, men just can't live in peace, I just think. I would rather walk home from the town on my own any night than have Richard with me; now Richard is a big fella, six foot two, and he is a big, big fella but I would still rather have me walk up than him walk up.

She continued:

[T]hey are trying to get you to join these groups you know, they torture you into joining them and then call you names or pick on you for not joining them. They don't torture women to join them so I think it's definitely easier to be a woman.

Later, when speaking of her ethno-national identity, Renee reflected how such pressures also affected her personal relationships:

I'm against them all regardless of what religion they are. I don't like the way you're maybe sitting in the house with your partner and the phone rings and he's made to go and do something that he doesn't want to do, you know. I have experienced that with a partner in the past. I wouldn't have it again, I just wouldn't have it again. It just controls your life, and you're scared of what's going to come to your door.

To be sure, male violence is increased as a consequence of conflict, but it does not solely take the form of male-on-male violence. Conflict significantly increases the rates of male-on-female violence as well, Northern Ireland being no exception (McWilliams, 2010). Because I had situated myself in the field and lived among many of these women, I was aware that domestic violence was something that some of these women would be familiar with, either personally or through their family, and yet it was not mentioned by a single woman interviewed in the north, not even in general terms.<sup>3</sup>

Of those women in the study who spoke about gender identity and its significance to their everyday lives, only one felt there was no gender inequality in Northern Irish society. Janine, the former single mother who defined gender difference in terms of femininity and masculinity and the restrictions she felt in expressing her 'tomboy' side through her desire to wear masculine clothes, was the sole person who believed that there is no inequality between men and women. Although she felt that, as

3 This is in stark contrast to the interviews conducted in Ireland, where a number of women recounted their own experiences of domestic violence.

a child, she was restricted on the basis of gender in terms of her interests and choices, Janine's belief might be partially explained in her claim that she had space to defy these norms. Furthermore, she was quite aware of inequalities in other areas of her life. For Janine, her sense of class and the accompanying inequality she faced was quite pronounced. She was quite adept at articulating an awareness of structural inequality and was quite comfortable doing so in relation to her class position, which would indicate that, for this woman, her negative experiences based on class identity are more pronounced than those based on gender.

This does not mean, however, that gender identities and experiences of difference become insignificant. Surprisingly, it was Janine who made the most profound statement when speaking about her gender identity:

Well, I suppose I am happy to be a woman and I suppose I am proud to have children and do things that men can't do. But sometimes it would be nice to be a man. Men have an easier life.

This disclosure is noteworthy because it represents the trivial ways in which gender inequality can be conceptualised. It accentuates the degree to which gender inequality is normalised. Ultimately, there is some recognition of gender inequality (even if there is a refusal to name it) but the narrative suggests an acceptance of these norms, to the degree that the only way to escape from them is to switch genders. The significance of such a statement lies in the acceptance of gender tropes, a recognition that men do indeed benefit from gender inequalities, but that the only way to transform this is to change one's gender.

## Class and ethno-national identities

In order to appreciate the complexities of gender identity in Northern Ireland it is necessary to compare how women articulate their gendered subject positions with other elements of their identity. The lack of clarity, evidenced above, regarding gendered subject positions and subsequent awareness of inequality becomes more pronounced when compared with the ease with which these women discussed their class identities and related experiences of oppression. Women, on the whole, recounted with effortlessness and lucidity their sense of class. Such dialogue often invoked passion and emotion in a manner absent from conversations on gender, conversations which were often awkward and lacked easy, or even any, progression. On some occasions there was clearly little interest in reflecting on the subject of gender and even resistance to doing so.

This pattern is yet more pronounced in light of the discussion of ethno-national identity. Many women could pinpoint exact moments at which their sense of difference with regard to ethno-national identity became apparent to them. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent,

for the 'crystallising moments' of class identification. Furthermore, unlike gender, ethno-national and class-based identities were far from essentialised or naturalised and were seen as something to be challenged. Heather, the working-class woman who expressed gender inequality in terms of fear around personal safety for her husband when walking alone, offered a typical example of the role of early experiences in the fashioning of ethno-national identity. When asked to recall the first time she realised she was Protestant, she said:

I was about six and I was out playing rounders and a wee boy from up the street who was a Catholic and I beat him at rounders and he says one day Maggie Thatcher wouldn't be here and that I'd be on my knees praying for him to take me on or something, that I was an Orange B [bastard]. And I ran home and told my Mum and she told me what it meant, and she was gonna kill him [laughs].... I still remember it. That was the first time I ever knew there was a difference.

Heather's experience is not dissimilar to that of the other women interviewed. Maria, the Catholic single mother who identifies as British, explained how she first became aware of and adopted her ethno-national identity when she was fourteen years of age:

I was in school 'cause I said I was Irish and we were doing out ... CVs, you know, on the computer, and I would put it as Irish but I was born in London. [Teacher] says you can't be Irish if you were born in London you know, you're British ... the North of Ireland is part of Britain; oh alright so, I'm British. So I was at school.

The conversations on class identity reveal a similar pattern. Discussions on class identity share commonalities with those relating to ethno-national identity in that an early awareness of difference was easy to pinpoint and in both instances the identities were imposed due to external forces. In the case of ethno-national identities, structural divisions force individuals to 'pick a category' or instruct them which appropriate category to pick; in the case of class, it is externally enforced by the structural and hierarchical nature of capitalism.

Women were clearly able to articulate an early awareness of class difference. Janine, the working-class former single parent in her early thirties, explained how her sense of being working class became manifest. The awareness of difference is very much defined by class associations, in this case housing estates:

Well, at school and stuff I went to a grammar school and nearly all my friends would have lived in private areas or their families had good jobs; they always had good clothes and yet there was even a few times where I got friendly with a girl and her daddy didn't like her coming to my house because I lived in Stoneview [an impoverished housing estate] and there was a stigma over it.

Janine is quite aware of the implications of her location imparting a class identity on her. At the time of the interview she was in the process of moving from an infamous working-class estate and into a more 'respectable' area of the town, as a means of attaining some upward mobility. The external processes of identification with regard to class are evident. By no means are the class recollections as precise as those on ethno-national identity but they contain much more clarity than those on gender.

## Conclusion

How might differences in articulations of gender, ethno-national and class identities be accounted for? On a superficial level it would appear that gender is less salient than class or ethno-national identity. However, upon closer inspection these women's narratives reveal that gender identity is both more complex and more naturalised – that is, gender inequalities are seen as incontestable (as are class inequalities). The lack of overall clarity in discussions of gender identity should not be taken as an indication of its lesser significance in comparison with class or ethno-nationality. The saturation of discourse on ethno-nationality and, to a lesser extent, class have not only helped in the awareness of difference but also offered a means for articulating it. The binary construction of ethno-national identity that discursively permeates Northern Ireland's social landscape has no doubt affected the ways in which people articulate their sense of self. Research has highlighted the extent to which ethno-national identity is a subject most in the north are fluent in from an early age (Muldoon *et al.*, 2007). The media, as well as political, educational, religious and state institutions, bombard those living in Northern Ireland with messages regarding ethno-national identity which are reproduced in everyday interactions (McAuley and Tonge, 2010; Todd, 2007a; Trew *et al.*, 2009). Ethno-national identity is very much formalised and public. The Good Friday Agreement has played a large role in this, as Coulter and Murray argue, in that it 'reproduces and legitimates many of those forms of ethno-political feeling and compensation that sparked the Northern Irish conflict in the first place ... [the Agreement] presumes and prescribes those very ethnopolitical interests and inclinations that it ostensibly seeks to overcome' (2008: 15). The Agreement publicly enshrines ethno-national identity, so much so that it is arguably difficult to determine where the rote discourse which delineates the relative identity categories ends and the articulation of an actual subject position begins.

Therefore, while it would appear that the sharper recollections of ethno-national identity might suggest its salience relative to other categories, further interrogation reveals the ways in which ethno-national identity is formalised, public and scripted for those living in Northern

Ireland. As Heather stated when asked about what it means to be Protestant, 'Well, I was always told I was a Protestant'. She had a similar answer in relation to the British component of her identity: 'I remember filling in a form and saying to my Mummy, "What do I fill in?"' For many of the women interviewed, the parameters of Northern Irish society and its structural and institutional elements create a situation whereby residents are forced to choose a label from categories that are constructed as binary opposites. As Sarah, the single mother studying for her PhD, succinctly explained:

[T]hat's more to do with the shit and the Troubles and people feeling that they had to be ... either that you say British or that Irish. I think you had to be seen to be taking a side. It couldn't be that you just wanted to live in the country and, you know, to get on with things, kind of thing.

The narratives offered up by these women clearly indicate knowledge of how their ethno-national identities are shaped and a sense that there is a structural element to the process.

The relative ease with which many women recounted early memories of class differentiation can be explained in a similar manner. While in Northern Ireland the messages regarding class are less overt than those pertaining to ethno-nationalism, there is a definitive public element to class identity. There is a significant class dimension to Northern Irish politics and class is very much integral to the way in which Northern Irish society is structured (Coulter, 1999; Shirlow and Shuttleworth, 1999). Most significantly, the public nature of class identity comes from the fact that it is closely entwined with ethno-national identity, in that 'extreme' forms of unionism and nationalism (loyalism and republicanism respectively) are considered very much working-class politics, while moderate positions are occupied by the middle and upper classes (Tonge, 2002). Class, while less formalised than ethno-national identity, is therefore made more public in Northern Ireland because of the ways in which the two intersect. This, therefore, creates a less awkward space for the articulation of class-based identities relative to gender. Gender, as the narratives demonstrate, is conceived as private. Discussions around gender identity and difference are most often centred within the home – considered (erroneously) a private domain. Furthermore, the historical essentialising of gender difference through biology has, to be sure, contributed to this.

More disheartening are the perspectives on agency with regard to tackling gender- and class-based inequalities. It is impossible to gauge from the data the extent to which the public/private dichotomy has furthered a lack of agency. However, it is fair to say that the public, formal reproduction of and emphasis on ethno-national identities has made them easier to articulate, but, worryingly at the expense of other identity categories. It is clear that the contextual landscape in Northern

Ireland has produced, unsurprisingly, an easily articulated sense of ethno-national identity and, to a lesser extent, class. In comparing these categories, however, we are forced to consider the extent to which this comes at the expense of other subject positions. The ethno-national discourse has been so overwhelming that it has overshadowed other structural differences. Therefore, when people are asked about other elements of their identity, gender especially, they are startled and unsure of how to respond. The Good Friday Agreement and the resultant institutional framework do not challenge this and, as a result, raise serious questions, most notably in relation to mobilising for change in terms of gender- and class-based inequalities.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Jonathan Greene and Pauline Cullen for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.