Women in cooperation before, during and after the Agreement:

An interview with activist Ailbhe Smyth[1]

***Ailbhe Smyth** is a long-time activist on feminist, LGBTQ and other social issues and was the founding head of Women's Studies at UCD where she lectured for many years. She played a key role in the Marriage Equality referendum campaign, and was co-director of the Together for Yes national campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment.*

She chaired the National Lesbian and Gay Federation (now NxF) (publisher of Gay Community News) for many years. Currently, she is Chair of Women's Aid and also of Ballyfermot STAR Addiction services. A board member of Age Action and of the Women's Global Health Network Ireland, she is Patron of the Women's Collective Ireland. In 2019 she was included in Time Magazine's list of the 100 Most Influential People. She was awarded an honorary doctorate in laws by the University of Galway and is a Freewoman of the City of Dublin.

Megan McDermott (MMD): Ailbhe, you've been working in and around activism for a long time. Where do you find the magic in what you do? What makes it worth it for you?

Ailbhe Smyth (AS): What may be an even more interesting question is why, when you don't win, do you keep on doing it? Because I think that activism becomes deeply embedded in your own sense of your value and personal worth, and your own value system in the world. While I don't think at all that everybody has to do what I do, I know that for me, this really matters to my sense of self as doing, or at least trying to do, something useful. Not specifically for people like me, because I am a person who enjoys immense privilege. I'm white, I live in Ireland, in Europe. I was born and raised middle class. I have an education. I had a good job, all my life. I have huge, huge

privileges. But I am very intensely aware that that was the random luck of my birth. Really, that is something I think is so deeply, deeply unfair when I look around me and look further afield and see that others, the vast majority of people, don't have these privileges. […]

I always think back to that that notion – I mean, I started out in feminism – that women hold up half the sky and we are entitled to half the proceeds, if you like, of that sky. But I think that is also applicable to people in other situations apart from gender.

I think you also come to a point in your life where activism in a way becomes second nature. You know, somebody comes to you and says, "Look, do you see what's going on out there in Dún Laoghaire at the moment with the migrant protests? Shouldn't we be doing something about that?". You say, "Yes, totally". That you're aware that you do certain things and it leads to other insights and other contacts. I think in Ireland over my lifetime one of the great challenges has been to make those kinds of semi and informal relationships work, North and South. I haven't cracked it by a longshot.

MMD: Looking back, as Ireland moved into the '70s and '80s, what were the priorities of the women's and the LGBTQI+ movements, respectively? And what were the primary challenges they faced and the factors and ideas that shaped your involvement?

AS: Well, I got involved in feminist politics, it was really towards the end of the '70s. I didn't actually come out as lesbian until the end of the '80s. So there are, kind of, gaps. […] I was also technically working as an academic in UCD. So I began to become aware that even despite my considerable privilege, that, as a woman, I was not favoured within the system I was working in as an academic or in terms of my own personal life. Because I had got married in the early '70s, and within a six-month period, realised that marriage was not for me, definitely, and left the marriage, which in Ireland proved at that time to be a very scandalous thing to do.

So when I was quite young, I came up against the limits of what my privilege could bring me. What it didn't bring me was equality and fairness in my workplace. It absolutely did not bring me choice, options, independence, autonomy in my personal life. I began to, I suppose, really push against the personal freedom and choice, and sense of capacity to live my life as I wanted to lead it. […] It made me ill actually.

But it also enormously gave me time to think and to read and to listen out for what was happening. […] It was really through feminism that I became more political, and began to understand that you really couldn't do anything until you looked at power, where it lay, in whose hands it was, who was exercising it and how, and what kinds of systems and structures were there. And that in order to analyse that, that you needed to have some intellectual tools. But all those intellectual tools came to be through North American and European feminism, really, and quite strongly tinged with Marxist thinking at that time. […] To be aware that there were ideas and thinking in these countries that I found very fascinating, and that I could, sort of, bring into my own thinking here in Ireland.

But then also, it was a kind of radical feminist politics in the US, which didn't translate very well to Ireland, but I began to think you can't do what people do elsewhere. You have to look at what's happening in your own country, and understand why it is specifically that women are made to be so submissive, made to be so docile, so obedient and so oppressed. […] It was very clear to me by the end of the '70s that you really had to take on that huge apparatus of the Catholic Church, which was so involved in politics.

Then, at the same time, you know, I was becoming very aware of North-South relations, because I always describe my own relationship to the North as sideways-on, but with quite a lot of family connections as my mother's family is from the North, and that was still very deeply embedded in our family as I was growing up. When I left my marriage […] I met an English chap from Queen's and began a serious relationship with him […] and decided to have a child. But he lived in Belfast, I lived in Dublin. We were constantly to-ing and fro-ing between those two places.

My daughter was born in '77, so we were hitting into really difficult times, where you couldn't but be aware of the conflict. […] It was actually part of my life. But I was not directly involved myself, which is what I mean by this sideways-on relationship, which I think is not all that unusual for people from the South.

[…] After a while my daughter went to live with her dad in Belfast, and the railway line was being bombed the entire time. I mean, there was rarely a trip she made when they weren't offloaded in Dundalk, or somewhere. When she was 10 or 11, I used to put her sitting beside the nuns, because I thought that they would look after her. Many years later, she said really the shoe was

on the other foot, because the nuns would get into an awful panic and she, the 11 year old, would have to say, "Follow me!"

I suppose what I'm saying is that we often think when we talk about North-South relations, what we mean is what is the political relationship. I think all of us, both sides of this wretched border, should be aware that quite a lot of us have these familiar and personal experiences. We have these lives that are imbricated, one in the other. You know, my daughter who basically grew up between Dublin and Belfast now lives in London. Her partner is English and my grandchildren are growing up as little English children who talk about "Ireland" [*in an English accent*], and I keep saying it's called Ireland [in my Irish accent], and they say, "Yes, Ireland" [*in an English accent*]. […]

You know, I think we have to speak more about those complex lives that we have, that refuse to acknowledge the rigidity of borders. I certainly spent a great deal of my adult life, from my twenties onwards, negotiating those borders one way and another. Whether they're caused by the depths of history or by Brexit or whatever they're caused by. That we have to never, never, never give up. We always have to go on negotiating and pulling them apart and showing how permeable they are. That they are never insurmountable.

Because you and I no doubt have, each of us, crawled through the middle of them, jumped over them, walked around them, flown over them. We find ways to, I wouldn't say transcend, because I don't think you can do that: it's more, kind of, a negotiation. But that negotiation in itself is a mark of the permeability. I think, for me in my life, that has always been extremely important; that sense of those multiple connections that have actually informed the kind of person I am and the kind of politics I have, which is not simple. Never simple.

MMD: At an academic level, you were spearheading the Women's Studies Forum and later the Women's Studies Department at UCD. What was the level of academic exchange North-South?

AS: Well, that's a really very good question. In fact, because I was in women's studies and in the women's movement, my own sense was always that it was important to try to make contact with women, on various issues that we were working on, but also academically to try to reach across to see what were we doing with our programmes and our curriculums.

Also, I suppose to make those very personal connections. Some connections came through publishing a little bit later on in the '80s, because I was editor of Attic Press for a while. We worked quite closely with women who were writing in the North. Edna Longley, for example, did a pamphlet for me at one stage about something to do with Ireland and culture and whether there were two cultures or not. There were, again, those quite complicated sorts of relationships.

At some point during the 80s Monica McWilliams, who was in the University of Ulster at that time, asked me if I would be an external examiner for their programme of women's studies. I went up two or three times to be an external examiner for Monica. We had met before maybe at a conference in Britain on women's studies. That's where you would meet people from the North as well.

Of course, that meant that we were actually looking at how we were going about women's studies, because you didn't get asked to be an external examiner unless there was a sense that you were going to be in sympathy or in tune with the way in which that particular programme that you were examining was working. I think Monica, I'm pretty sure she came down and spoke [in UCD]. […]

Later, I think it might have been just after the Agreement, Marie Mulholland and myself met and decided that we really needed to do a conversation about how things worked North and South, and between North and South. I think that we ultimately did a conversation, which became an article in a magazine I was producing at the time called FM , which was feminist and a bit queer. […]

The article was called something like *The Elephant in the Sitting Room* because Marie said that that's exactly what the north of Ireland was for women in the South. I absolutely agreed with her, because I had started a series of conferences in UCD from maybe the end of the 1980s, 1990 onwards, and we would always seek to have participants, contributors from the North speaking. I always remember Pauline Conroy standing up at a conference and saying, "The quickest way to empty a room at a feminist conference in the South is to say, 'let's talk about the North'". Everybody would disappear like snow of a ditch, because women in the South, a lot of us, didn't know what to be saying about women and the women's movement and feminism in the North.

I think at that point, and maybe this was something that had been happening during the 1980s, there really came a sense that there was a difference in terms of speeds and rhythms between the South and the North. It is customary to say this was because of the Troubles: it was because of conflict in the North that the women's movement got slowed down. I don't think that's quite accurate. There was also, however, in the South during the 1980s a very severe economic recession, when a very vibrant, dynamic, radical women's movement in the '70s had become something much more under the radar in the 1980s. I and many others were very aware that we were fighting to re-radicalise the movement in the South.

I tried to do that in UCD, through the Women's Studies Forum and by inviting people to come and speak on all kinds of topics, including from the North. There was that sense of a kind of a difference in terms of the context, the issues that we were dealing with, whether they were economic or narrowly political. I think that's fair enough. But it meant that there was, in my experience – this is not the experience of everybody – there was a distance between what was happening North and South. Again, this is my own analysis – I think that that was exacerbated, unintentionally, by the growing emphasis throughout the '80s in the North, the growing focus on women, basically, as peacebuilders.

I suppose that culminated, obviously, with the Women's Coalition, which I think was absolutely remarkable and did fantastic work. But there is always a price for working with the mainstream. The price for working with the mainstream, I think – and again, I could well be speaking out of turn – was that some of the really knotty, difficult issues for feminists and specifically around reproductive rights generally, and abortion in particular, were modulated. They were moved to the side. They were not on the mainstream agenda.

You know, if there had been a really good Agreement, there would have been an agreement that abortion would have been made a right for women, North and South, for example. But there was never any question of something like that happening any more than there would have been a question of LGBTQI rights. At that stage, we just talked about lesbian and gay rights. They were never going to be centre stage. Feminist, radical feminist demands or queer demands were never going to be centre stage.

I think in the South, something similar happened but for different reasons. We got knocked back by the 1983 abortion referendum in the South, and then with economic recession that really knocked the welly out of the women's movement for a good number of years. It didn't really start to bang back again until the '90s. It took a long time for that to regain the kind of vibrancy and radical dynamism it had earlier on. […]

Of course these moments of under the radar, low-key activism, whether they were in the North because of the Troubles or in the South because of the economy, it's also because of patriarchal control and [the establishment] not really enjoying the feminist movement very much, and wanting it to be quietened down. In effect, tamping it down, and channelling it in other ways. I think it quite suited [the establishment] in some respects in the North for a lot of that feminism, not all of it – you always had Cumann na mBan and others – but a good deal of that energy for a certain length of time to be more focused into building peace. I think that has been reflected on in work since then by people like Jennifer Todd, for example.

MMD: Those compromises by the likes of the Women's Coalition, which strategically left aside certain knotty issues; was there any conversation about that between activists South and North, in terms of ambitions?

You know, I'm not sure that I would agree that explicit or even highly conscious compromises are made. I think that there is a sense in which politically, you always have to kind of follow a certain flow. That it's almost organic: that you recognise or that you know at some, maybe not very explicit, level that "this, that and the other" kinds of issues are not actually going to work very well. So they are tamped down, because you are aware that you're working in an environment which is fundamentally hostile to them. That, being the more vulnerable, the less powerful, you have to tailor your talk to fit that.

I certainly would not like to point to the Women's Coalition and say they made conscious decisions in that regard, because I would be pretty sure that that was not quite the way it happened. I don't know, I wasn't there. Just as down south, we did not decide after 1983 to go quiet for seven years or eight years. We didn't. It takes time. It took time in the South to pick ourselves up again. In the North, there was a very good and simple reason why women were, by and large, or a large number of women were going in one direction, which was that life was absolutely unbearable and that something had to be

done for women who were trying to raise families and look after men folk, and try to ensure some kind of stability in everyday and community life. So that became the priority, rather than something else. So, you know, I think it's very easy to blame. I definitely wouldn't do that at all.

However, I do think that there is an argument which has been well made about the tendency to be, first and foremost, building bridges between communities in the north of Ireland, which meant that contentious issues were left to the second rung or the third rung. I think that did happen. I think that that was, in a way, kind of channelled through groups like the Women's Coalition. But also the Northern Ireland women's rights movement took a very similar kind of line for, I think, quite a long time. I'm not an expert on this. But there was certainly a sense when we started in the South, you know, having to deal with abortion again in 1992, because of the X case, that there wasn't anything similar happening up north.

So in that regard, there were not many conversations. We did try through various meetings, I think, and they tended, certainly from my point of view because I was very involved in academic life at that time, albeit as a feminist, to happen at these more academic or conference type meetings. That was very difficult in the '80s. It happened a bit. In the early '90s it was as if things went quite quiet in many respects. There was a good deal going on, maybe there was pedalling going on under the surface. In my limited experience, there was not that much exchange. There was awareness and attempts to build up that awareness.

But it was after the Good Friday Agreement that, certainly in UCD, I began to think eventually we have to do something about North-South relations, between feminists and women generally, because I felt that I was doing nothing about it. I felt that nothing was happening in my little neck of the woods […]. That there were so many issues that we needed to tackle that were not being tackled. That we needed to confront those issues ideally on the island as a whole. I'm thinking of very obvious ones like reproductive rights, but also domestic violence and rape and poverty, where perhaps the roots of poverty were somewhat different North and South, but women were still being impacted and affected in the same kinds of ways.

Also at that time the relative absence of women from representative politics was absolutely appalling – even worse in the North than in the South. […] It was around about the mid '90s that I started looking for funding for a North-

South programme. We actually got funding in the end from the P and R [Peace and Reconciliation] funds to do a programme called *POWER*. Officially, it was something like *Politically Organised Women Educating for Representation*. But the way I thought of it was Politically Organised Women Educating for Revolution. It was agreed that that wouldn't get us any funding from anybody. Somebody said "Representation, not revolution. Representation."

It was specifically designed but very late in the day. You might be saying, "My God, you're talking about the late 1990s." I'm saying, yes! That was the way it was. Bringing women North and South together in a way to say, "What are the issues that confront us? How can we actually talk about those issues together?" What tends to happen in those kinds of situations is that you talk more about the ones where you feel there is a real commonality, without fear of running into murky, difficult, dirty political waters. That's still the case today, by the way. So those would have been waters where, if you like, both unionist and nationalist or republican women could have spoken easily with women from the South who were working class, middle class, Catholic, non-Catholic, whatever. We did try and pull it out in that *POWER* programme.

MMD: Do you have any examples of that?

I remember saying in one of the modules where we were talking about racism, "But, look, as white people, as white women, we are all racist." There was the most terrible kerfuffle. Women North and South were saying, "No, we're not! How dare she." […] What it spoke to for me was the sense that we lived these very enclosed lives in Ireland, enclosed in one way in the North, enclosed in another way in the South, and that once you moved off a very important but, at the same time, quite narrow ground of commonality, it was really difficult to establish conversations that everybody could participate in in some kind of calm and reasonable way. It seemed to me to be all the more important that we should try and do that because you learned so much. The racism issue was ultimately resolved. […]

I had experience of it just recently myself, because I had a programme last year called *Encounters*, which was bringing women North and South together post-COVID to talk on Zoom about issues that affected us. It's still very cautious. Very, very ginger. A lot of it comes, and came in the '90s, from women in the South feeling "I don't know anything about them and I'm not even terribly sure I want to know or need to know much more." In the North

it's "they could never understand what we've been through", which, by the way, I think is absolutely true.

But it is not exactly a good basis for arriving at a common understanding. Unless you try and set up the structures where you can actually do that, you have not got a flying hope of setting anything up that's really going to work and make this into some kind of unified island. […]It's when you recognise it's difficult, that you can begin to move on.

[…]You've got to push at the boundaries. Once you reach the boundary and you stay with it, and keep going and say, let's not fall at this first hurdle. Let's try and talk across this big difference in understanding or empathy or knowledge, or whatever it is. Let's keep doing that. I have never understood why programmes will be funded for a year, two years. You know, we got funding for the *POWER* programme again, but only for women on one side of the border. We were saying, "But that's not the point of the programme!" What's the point? We did it. It was a very different thing. The *Encounters* programme wasn't funded again, even though it was doing that precise thing or trying to do it. But some other kind of version of it got funded. So there is that sense that there is an acknowledgment that unless people come together to have those conversations, they're not going to happen.

So when you ask me the question what kinds of conversations were going on? There were not many, because, actually, there were not that many fora in which we could have conversations. We had to go out and create those. At that time in those programmes, I was working with great women from the North, like Joanna McMinn. There was Joanne Vance, Eilish Rooney, you know, all women who were working really hard and doing hugely interesting things. So it wasn't that we didn't have the know-how. We did. There was a lot of understanding and expertise probably on both sides, really, and a willingness.

But unless you get support structures that, in a sense, recognise the importance of that meeting of minds, meeting of lives, the opportunity to take a good look at one another and to say, there's much that connects us and there is much that's different in our histories and our contexts too: we need to talk about both of those things. I need to understand what's different about your history and your current context. But you need to understand what's different about mine, too. It's not so that we will do the same things, but so that we know who we are. Who we are is complicated. Who we are is

not all the same. Why should it be? There are many things that divide us, which I think leads me to make a comment about maybe an aspect of feminism and the women's movement in the North.

The whole issue of intersectionality in the South has been difficult. But I do think that certainly from where I stood from, say, the early 1980s onwards, there was definitely an awareness that it was not okay to simply speak as a white middle class woman. It became more complex, then, as some of us came out as lesbian and began to confuse the issue and muddy the water a bit more through sexuality. Then certainly from the beginning of women's studies there was a very conscious effort to build in understandings of racialised and ethnic differences and to tackle racism – not always very successfully, I would say – but, you know, that awareness of intersectionality was definitely there. When I say it wasn't very successful, I really mean that. It's something that we are still challenged by, and still working on because it is really difficult actually.

But in the North, I think that that whole issue of intersectionality tended definitely to have lesser prominence. I mean, there is a reason for that. It's not laziness. It's not irresponsibility. It was because the frontline was actually at home and needed to be tackled there.

But one of the impacts of that was a very fragmented women's movement, probably, but also a lesser emphasis on intersectionalities, which I think is now beginning to change. I see that certainly coming from the LGBTIQ movement. I was just looking at the notice for Belfast Pride saying, "All our feminist friends, come along and support our trans brothers and sisters," and thinking that's really beginning to come out in different kinds of ways. I think that there is a much greater awareness of the nature of racism in the north of Ireland now too, as I think there is in the South as well, although still not enough, and an awareness that that needs to be tackled by our social movements and to be part of our social movement politics.

But I think that that sense of the complexity of the makeup of a social human being, it was inevitably compressed – not so much reduced. It was compressed in the North, because there was a real frontline, which was really dangerous, which was quite fatal, which did have enormous impact on the lives of working class people in particular. Middle class people can be very lazy. That's true North and South. I would say that without any apology. I am middle class. There can be a sitting back in your own comfort. That's why I

think social movement politics are so important, which is to move people out of their comfort zone and to put the question, do you really think this is right? And watch them squirm. Nothing gives me greater pleasure. By the way, if you take that out of the interview, I'll be very cross.

MMD: You talked about the discomfort that southern women felt sometimes engaging in these conversations. I wanted to ask about the role that guilt might play among us southern women. Also, it has become a norm here in the North to be having these conversations and doing cross-community work, and single identity work to prepare, alongside a huge understanding of the idea of compromise, and what that feels like, personally and politically. And that's not necessarily the case in the South.

AS: I'm not a community worker so I can't answer that question absolutely. I think that there are levels of awareness and sophistication in community work in the South, which are remarkable.

[…] I think there is more awareness now that you can't just blunder into these kinds of meetings. That you can have these meetings and conversations, but that they need to be very carefully moderated and facilitated, so that you help people to overcome that kind of discomfort.

[…] I think it's very interesting what you were saying that there is often that feeling of people feeling guilty in the South. I think it's probably right across the board, women and men. But women are quicker to feel guilt, because we always feel that we're not meeting the mark. You know, it's that sort of imposter syndrome that the vast majority of women seem to carry with us and which needs to be pulled out of us.

It's interesting. I mean, it was the great Audre Lorde who said that guilt is a pointless emotion. It is, of course, because guilt just stymies you and stifles you. It doesn't actually enable you to do anything. I think in the South it's guilt, but I think there is shame as well, actually. […] Shame is something you have to work out what it is, how it is, how you feel. Guilt is, to some extent, more intellectual or cerebral. Shame is about affect. It is always bound up with history of one kind or another, immediate or long term.

Shame is very hard. I have often thought that there is this kind of shame face thing. "Oh, my God, we should know a bit more" or "we should care more". The reality is, and I think this was partly what was meant by the "elephant in the sitting room", that because the South was okay, we didn't know more.

We didn't really care enough. Of course, I am excepting all those amazing people who have never stopped caring and who just grew up that way or adopted it as their politics, or somehow had it in their DNA. I'm talking about the general run of us, as people in the South. And looking at the general run of our politicians, who either blundered in and did the wrong thing or else did nothing. It took a long time for them to begin to do something. Even then, it's always capable of being withdrawn.

I think we're in a very different time now. I think there is much more openness. I think that people recognise now that the centre cannot hold and that there will be change. But you know that all the polls say down south that people want a united Ireland. But when you say, "Well, what are you prepared to give up for that to be a possibility?" They basically say, "Nothing". There's no give on that. […]

You know, I have my own sense of shame. When I start off an interview with you by saying, "Look, I'm afraid I'm an imposter here because I don't really know anything about the North," that's also my saying, actually, at this stage of my life, I should know an awful lot more, particularly as my life has been so mixed up between North and South. I haven't lived there, but I've been up and down all my life and connected with people who were part of the North. Yet, I think probably I haven't cared enough.

I care more now, actually. The reason I really care about it so much now is I think the North has been through enough. I just think people have had it and want now to move on to something different, and that it's up to all of us to be part of working out what that difference is. I don't by any means have all of the answers.

For me, it just simply makes sense that a tiny, small little island on the edge of the Atlantic, which will within the next hundred years start to be flooded by that Atlantic anyway, and our coastal towns will be disappearing, we all have to stand together, to work together to try and keep this island afloat and relatively prosperous, so that everybody can live a relatively prosperous life. A happy life, I suppose. I think I really felt over the past, maybe 10 years or so, that's enough now. That's enough. People can't go on having trouble. We can't go on just standing on the sidelines saying, "Oh, we'd love that to be resolved. That would be lovely. A unified island, lovely."

MMD: How did the All Island Women's Forum come about?

The Forum came about because there was a meeting called, within the Shared Island project, which is in many ways a very laudable project and very well intentioned, but it was a meeting of women who were seen to be prominent North and South in women's groups, community groups, a couple of politicians on each side. That conversation was on Zoom at the end of COVID.

You would think we'd need a few hours. Not at all. It was granted an hour and a quarter. Whereas the youth conversation had been granted a whole day. I was absolutely incandescent with rage. An hour and a quarter for bringing women, and women have been holding this island together for so long. This is an absolute disgrace. At the end of it, I said, "Well, we absolutely need a regular, big kind of convocation or a forum or something for women to come together, and we need little groups of women meeting as well," and so on.

Within a few days, to be fair, the Shared Island people were on to me to say, "Right, so would you like to organise that?". I said, "Absolutely not. An organisation needs to organise it". But that was basically how it came about because women were being overlooked. […]

So I think that we have a lot of work to do at the moment.[…] I think that there is an eagerness to do this work, although it's hard. I think we're at a time of, you know, having to rethink and re-envision what a whole island society would look like. Also, the more difficult work is what would it feel like? What would your feelings be? That's where the trouble is all the time. It's my feelings about my flag etc. So how do we shift those feelings in ourselves?

MMD: One example of the flow of people South-North and East-West in contemporary Irish history has been women leaving the Republic to travel to the UK for access to abortion or contraceptives. One of the best examples was the 1971 Contraceptive Train. For certain issues, like abortion and reproductive rights, it has been as if our borders are extended when needed or when it has suited the state, but also, to great effect by activists filling in those gaps in services. I wondered how that North-South, East-West dynamic impacted your engagement with activism?

AS: […] It was so difficult here in the South that I think there was a tendency to fight, certainly in the early years, very much in what you could call an enclosed way, focused on the South, which I think was also true to some

extent about the North. […] There was also a realisation down south that in the '80s, as I said before, there was a kind of depression following the success of the insertion of the Eighth Amendment into the Constitution, that we were up against very, very powerful forces.

It really wasn't until the '90s, that we began to realise that, actually, we could and we should and we needed to try and fight against those forces. For various reasons, socioeconomic reasons, it took us a while to actually do that. But, you know, it was still very much specific to the South. That awareness of what was happening in the North sat side by side. […]

But there's that sense of women trekking over from the North and from the South for abortions in Britain because of the CTA, the Common Travel Area, which is absolutely crucial. When it looked as if Brexit might end the CTA, oh my God, I could immediately feel myself getting red in the face and deeply, deeply worried because women are still having to travel from the south after 12 weeks for abortions, because it's so hard to get one here after 12 weeks.

I think in that sense what I spoke about at the very beginning, of the permeability of our borders, is really important because you have the abortion pill going up north, and also, in earlier times, coming from the North, down south. So the abortion pill, has been making the border crossing for a long time now. Women have been crossing borders from the North over to Britain, from the South over to Britain and now from the North probably down south a bit more.

One of our demands in the lead up to 2018 was that abortion should be available for women coming down from the North on the same terms as it's available to women in the south. Because it's one of the very rare, universally free, medical procedures in the South, it should be available free of charge for women in the North as well. There was the joint campaigning. There were, of course, points of connection all along with Alliance for Choice, and so on, but the actual close working didn't come significantly, I think, until Repeal campaign.

MMD: Did activists from the North come South in the lead up to the '83 referendum?

AS: It's a good question. There were some, certainly. Goretti Horgan, for example, is from the South and up in Derry. There's always been to a 'to and fro' there. But I'm talking about in general, I don't think there was. […]

Of course Nell McCafferty was herself from Derry. People like Nell had very different relationships with the North than people like me, who didn't have those. So depending on who you talk to, you're going to get a somewhat different picture of that.

I think it would be reasonably fair to say that there wasn't that much joint activity. But there certainly was an awareness that nowhere on the island of Ireland was good for women when it came to abortion. It would have been difficult for us to come together, because it would have been difficult to come together to have some kind of all-Ireland vision.

The only political party that had that all-Ireland vision at that time was Sinn Féin. To be very blunt about it, Sinn Féin has only lately come to the table as regards abortion. They would have melted, definitely, like snow of a ditch had you raised it in earlier times. So, you know, it's been a long process for Sinn Féin. I'm not saying for individuals in Sinn Féin – there were always women working in Sinn Féin for abortion – but for the party, which was the big all-island party to come to that recognition. It was really because of Repeal that they had to make a move on that. It's not quite completed yet. Still more resistance in the North than in the South, I think.

I mean, smaller parties like People Before Profit are also all-island parties. People Before Profit have been pro-choice since, way, way, way back when. We hold very strongly to that, but I'm aware that we're small. So, you know, speaking about the big parties, certainly Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, they were never going to raise their hands for abortion anyway. I mean, it was the last thing on their cards.

I think it's that sense that states can disregard borders when it suits them, and women can disregard borders, that citizens, and non-citizens actually, can disregard borders when they really need to. So if we can do it for some things, we should be able to do it for everything. There shouldn't be exceptions.

It's so interesting, if you take abortion, specifically, thinking of Britain and the island of Ireland as a, kind of, almost seamless whole, when it comes to abortion. […] That the border doesn't matter. That's not what you think of. What you think of is, God, have I got the money for the Ryanair? You don't think, how do I get through the border? That's not what's stopping you. It's your socioeconomic situation that's stopping you, or your workplace, or that you're not a citizen, or the fact that you've got three kids already. That's the same North and South.

Certainly around Repeal, I had the sense that there was a real sense of sisterhood, camaraderie, bonding. I'm very nervous about that word, sisterhood. But there was a genuine sense of this is something that we need to fight for each other, as well as for ourselves. I hadn't really seen that. Marriage equality a bit the same, actually. I think I spoke at a Pride march in Belfast very shortly after we had repealed the eighth. But it was a Pride march, and I remember […] speaking about abortion, and it getting the loudest cheer because it was recognised as a, kind of, turning of the tables. It was the South was now helping the North, and it was hugely powerful that we had actually done that.

Lots and lots of women did come down from the North to canvas, and men, just as the London Irish Repeal group was composed of women from the North and South who fought really, really hard. So that was something that gave us an opportunity to work together, actually. It still happens, I think.

MMD: As you say, some of the best and most successful examples of cooperation that have happened organically were the ones where campaigners cross the borders to campaign for each other. So whether that was marriage equality or Repeal, and in reverse for Decriminalise and marriage equality in the North. What are your thoughts on the fact that sometimes that exchange flies somewhat under the radar?

AS: That's because it's about social movement politics, and it's about people getting out and protesting on the streets and marching and holding up banners, and shouting, quite rightly, true, horrible things about governments. Therefore, governments try not to notice them. Although, certainly I think as far as the South is concerned, there was a sobering recognition that people power was capable of achieving what governments could not and did not want to even try to achieve. What they knew they should be doing, but didn't have the nerve or were too cowardly to do. That was quite sobering down south, that people power really mattered.

The problem is that it's difficult to maintain that level of commitment and passion, and you really only get it in relation to very big issues. Even then, it's not a given. You have to go out and build it. People in large numbers can't sustain that kind of level of activism, because they have other things to be doing with their lives. They have families, they have jobs, they have other interests. So, you know, in a way, you always have to look on those big campaigns as tremendous opportunities. If you are a strategic activist and a

strategic campaigner, you always have to be asking yourself, what is the added value to this campaign? […] You need to try to hold on to what that added value is afterwards, and try and maintain at least some of the connections that have been made.

I think that there were good friendships, for example, made during both the Marriage Equality and the Repeal the Eighth campaigns in the South with people in the North. We had an encounter last year between, just as an example, LGBT Ireland and the Rainbow Project in the North, who had worked a bit before but who are now embarked on a much bigger hub type project between the two. I mean, that is trying to say what's the added value? These people know one another. Let's bring them in together to see what are they going to do together. In other words, how can we support that contact, that connection. It's nearly on a kind of case by case, one by one basis that you do that kind of work. It's slow work, but it is really important.

Another one that we had was the Shankill and the Falls centres and Ronanstown [west Dublin], down here in the South. They're all women's community-based centres. They've been encouraged to develop their links, and working with the great Eileen Weir, who's an absolute powerhouse. It is cross-community work, it is bridge-building work, but it's also done from a very feminist perspective. Doing that kind of work, it's looking out for those opportunities that are the added value that come from that sense of something good having been achieved, say, down south which had a knock-on effect on the North and speeded things up.

It [marriage equality and decriminalising abortion] also made people in the North sit up and say, actually, this happened to some extent because of the South. But also, it happened because we did not put our faith in Stormont because it simply wasn't there, it was Westminster came to the rescue. So you have yet another example of borders working in funny, odd, bizarre ways. You have republican women as keen to get those rights from Westminster as a unionist woman to get those rights from Westminster, or indeed a loyalist woman.

[…] Anything to do with people and politics is always more complicated than you can imagine. So you have to imagine even further. But the thing is, you have to not let that imagining stop you from doing the practical things now, and that it is also complicated. You know, what I would be saying to some of our political parties, one in particular maybe, is that I'm with you all the way

but it takes time. Because human beings are complex people, and they're not going to jump because you tell them to jump. They will jump when you're not looking, very often. If you think about Repeal, the jump happened not because of anything government did, but because a woman died. It's being ready for those unexpected moments, those moments where emotion comes to the surface.

Those are the ones that I think, politically, we have to be watching out for always. As soon as you see emotion, as soon as you see affect, you know you're in business. […] Really, if we're looking at a united island of Ireland in whatever shape or form […] that requires an emotional move as much as an intellectual and political move. It's trying to work that part out that is extremely difficult. I don't think it comes out of anybody's head primarily. It comes about through meetings of people, of emotions and feelings pinging off one another, hitting up against one another and of the awareness that grows from that kind of emotional contact, which can then be reconnected with the intellectual and political movements, so to speak.

[…] I think it's the time for emotional understanding, you know. […] Things are shifting, people are moving with these wonderful conversations and encounters with loyalist women for example. I mean, I would never have laid bets on anything like that happening 10 years ago, five years ago.

MMD: In the current context in Northern Ireland, we are lagging behind in certain crucial areas like domestic violence legislation and strategies. The economies North-South are obviously on two very different trajectories. Across the third sector, but particularly for the women's sector, funding has been cut to pieces in the North and there's no Executive to engage with. There is always a danger of conversations, movements or campaigns being increasingly hard to facilitate when one jurisdiction is diverging or regressing from the other in specific areas. What is your view on combating that at an activism or campaign level, where the economic and political realities that people are coming from and going home to at the end of the meeting are so starkly different?

AS: Yes, that's something which has been discussed and debated at the Forum […] There are always going to be differences. Sometimes one will be ahead and the other will be behind. At present, there is absolutely no doubt that the Irish economy, accompanied by a good deal of liberal change over the past decade, means that we are in the stronger position. Our society is

working more smoothly. Not without huge problems and fissures, not to mention the cost of living increases. There's a huge housing problem and we have a growing far right here in the South. We have many problems. Nonetheless, I think that we are in a stronger socioeconomic position than the North, and that is difficult for people. There is not one answer to that. That is about working through and acknowledging and understanding the differences if you're starting to imagine what a new state would look like.

I know that what happens tends to focus on the constitution, and that's a necessity. But I think that the groundwork, the "on the ground work", has to be about something else. Which is about thinking what would give the best solutions for people to the difficulties and problems in just simply living your life? Let's try and think in terms of creating a society which tries to take the best and work with that. If there's more of the best from one place than another, it's not a competition. It's about trying to achieve the best for everybody. Of course, what constitutes the best will itself be a matter of political debate.

So you're always going to have politics involved in it, but you're saying, okay, the constitution is one thing. That is about some kind of structure. But actually, the hard work of building a new kind of society is what becomes enabled by that. You have to be getting on with that process as you are working out the constitutional arrangements. […] Let's start off with human needs first, and what it is people need not just to survive, but to flourish in their lives.

Try and pick out and work together to find ways of creating that kind of society and to see it as a tremendous opportunity for us now, and for our children and our grandchildren. Certainly, for me, it's about thinking generationally. I think that kind of work requires a great deal of patience. […] It's about having conversations like this, for example. […] About really trying to tease things out endlessly or what seems endless.

I remember not very long after Repeal. Somebody – okay let me be blunt about it, an American – saying, "Oh, my goodness. It all happened so fast." I thought, "what?". I said, "You're looking at a broken woman. 35 years, we've been at this, and 35 years before that and 35 before, and so on back to 1967." It takes time, it takes patience, and it takes imagination, and it takes feeling. It's not just about a load of, albeit elected, representatives deciding our futures. This is actually about everybody, which is why consultative assemblies of all kinds are really very important, North and South.

[…] I think, that there are big problems that we really need to sort out, like domestic violence. So you don't have to take on the entire world. You can actually do it more slowly and you bring people with you as you go. If we had referendums North and South tomorrow, I think people would actually be writing on their ballot papers, "Too soon! Too soon! Go away, come back again another day," and I think they would be right because we have a lot of ground work still to do.

MMD: What do you see as the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement in enabling and shaping all-island movements for equality and justice?

AS: Well, I suppose I would say, first of all, that we wouldn't be anywhere on speaking about an all-island *anything* without the Good Friday Agreement. So it is fundamental. The second thing I would say is that it is deeply flawed in many ways, of course. I think it left out women. You know, I'm just horrified. I think if there was a Good Friday Agreement being drawn up now, that it would be done with a much greater sense of broad diversity and intersectionality, because we're dealing with different issues now. Looking at migration and how that's going to actually increase, never mind equality issues, I think probably we would be coming at it a different way. But the point is, we wouldn't be anywhere at all were it not for the Good Friday Agreement as a foundation. But it was a foundation, and things have to change and move on from the Good Friday Agreement, which was inevitably of its time, for its time and insufficient at its time. So we need to bear those points in mind.

MMD: Do you see a new generation of activists coming through in the women's sector and LGBTQI+ sector, and is there adequate support in place for that succession planning?

AS: […] I'm very conscious just at the moment of brilliant activists in the LGBTQI space because that's where there's been a lot of pressure recently. I think they're absolutely fabulous. I say that North and South, having a small experience of seeing what's going on North and South. I think that's very remarkable. I think we see that across the island in the extent to which, unlike Britain, there has not been an anti-trans movement from feminist or lesbian or gay male perspectives. There is much more solidarity. There is also – and, again, this is true North and South – a much greater awareness of the diversity that exists and, therefore, the inequalities. […] So I have absolute faith and trust.

The one thing I would always say to community-based groups is you can trust government up to a point, but only up to a point. You have to be prepared to get out there and push for what you need. It will never be handed to you entirely on a plate. I think that the women's sectors are somewhat differently organised North and South. It seems to me there's a certain amount of depression in the North particularly in the community-based sector, because of the de-funding process. I think that a lot of very good women are working very hard to try to overcome that. It is definitely problematic. In the South, it's perhaps a little bit more buoyant.

Probably because of the differences between the two, I think it'll probably be necessary to work sub sector by sub sector, issue by issue. So, for example, the Women's Aid Federation in the North and Women's Aid in the South coming together – and that's being done, and supported and encouraged. […] Women's Collective Ireland and some of the community groups in the North coming together, the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) coming together with the Irish Country Women's Association and so on.

[…] I do have faith in that. I think that there's good leadership in the movements North and South, and I think that they are coming together as much as they possibly can, and that that will continue to grow and strengthen.

MMD: Is there a particular issue, just on that, that you'd like to see emerge in the all-island space over the next, say, decade?

AS: Look, over the next decade I think we really are going to be up against it as far as climate and environmental issues are concerned. I think they will be beginning to have an impact on the most marginalised and vulnerable people. I think we're going to see increased migration, which, again, will produce all kinds of difficulties and problems. […] We absolutely on this tiny island have to come together on that issue. […] We have to deal with the politics of that as much as anything else. I think that it requires all those of us who are activists and campaigners to be bringing to the table the skills and the understanding and the know-how and the commitment and the passion that we have for creating a better world, and for trying to ensure that people who are being stripped of everything retain their dignity.

[…] I think we're moving into a different era, when our issues about unification are actually going to seem quite small in relation to the big, global

crisis that we are facing into. I think that's no bad thing. […] It helps us maybe to put certain things into proportion in a way that we haven't had to do before. Maybe that will pull us up short, make us see good common sense and come together for truly the greater good. Not just of ourselves, but of others as well, strengthen this island and open it up to those who are in need.

I don't think that's farfetched. I think the people who don't have that ideal should be asking themselves what are their human responsibilities and rethinking where they're standing in the world, because you can't just go on standing in a position of privilege and not caring about what happens to everybody else. Down south, we didn't care for quite a long time, really, about the North.

So maybe the global crisis – and it is a crisis – is beginning now to make us understand that those days of not caring are not good enough. They're over. People talk about this being a secular age. I think if that helps us to think more about what happens to people in the everyday, that's all for the good.

Endnotes

[1] This interview was conducted by Megan McDermott (Project Support Officer, Centre for Cross Border Studies) on 26 July 2023. Preparatory research was undertaken by Hari Choudhari and Sophia Copeland (both interns at the Centre for Cross Border Studies, from Georgetown University).