Interview with Monica McWilliams, Belfast, 20 August 2014

Mo Hume a, Polly Wilding b

a School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RT, Scotland
b Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS6 3NL, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO
Available online 7 January 2015

Introduction

Monica McWilliams is a professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Ulster. Her research focuses on issues of domestic violence, human security and the role of women in peace processes. Monica combines her scholarly activities with a commitment to campaigning for radical transformation in women’s lives through her work as a feminist activist, politician and peace campaigner. A longstanding activist in the Northern Ireland women’s movement, she served as a member of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2003, representing the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, a non-sectarian cross-community political party. Although a minor party, the Women’s Coalition played a crucial role in the Multi-Party Peace Negotiations, specifically in generating a more inclusive agreement that engaged with broader issues, including resources for victims of the conflict. McWilliams served as Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission from 2005 to 2011, and in that capacity delivered the Commission’s advice, as mandated by the peace agreement, on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Here Monica shares some of her reflections on working in different spaces to engage the struggle for transformative change.

In a previous interview you described yourself going from an ‘accidental activist’ to a ‘human rights activist’ with ‘peace activist, feminist activist and party political activist along the way’. Could you tell me about how you became an accidental activist?

Mainly I described it as that because there are so many aspects to the different types of work I was involved in. It goes back to the civil rights movement in the 60s. I still have my Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association card which is something I’m very proud of. I was only a teenager in those years so you couldn’t really say that it was the foundation stone of my activism. But it made me think about the importance of campaigning and marching and strategizing for change. It was really in the mid-70s, I had come back from a postgraduate scholarship to the University of Michigan where I was exposed to a lot of ideas around gender and women’s rights, which I hadn’t seen so much here. I came back and discovered that a strong women’s movement had started in Northern Ireland, in which quite a few of my friends were engaged. So I got involved in that and through that with Women’s Aid. That was really where most of my activism would have started — there were very few refuges and there wasn’t even a domestic violence law at that time. We started campaigning and also setting up an organisation called Gingerbread which was an organisation for one parent families, to ‘ginger’ the government for more ‘bread’... that gave me the experience of being on a board, being on a committee, taking on advocacy roles, making...