

"Picture Politics" - Belfast, Northern Ireland

Katherine Side, Mount Saint Vincent University, conducts research in the areas of gender and voluntary community contributions, unpaid labour and "disciplining" Women's Studies. Currently, she is researching a SSHRC funded project, *Maintaining Lives on the Margins: Gender, Change and Rural Community Sustainability*.

The Moyle Women's Forum existed from February 1999 to December 2004, as a voluntary women's group in the Moyle District in Northern Ireland with the intention of advancing education, alleviating poverty and promoting the preservation and protection of health in the interests of community social welfare.

In autumn 2003, the group launched their second cross-community, photo-voice project, titled "Picture Politics," intended to improve cross-community relations among Catholics and Protestants in the district through the participation of community members from both traditions in an extended photography workshop. One of the main aims of "Picture Politics" was to learn about shared history. This came about after participants on "Snapshot on Identity" acknowledged that their knowledge of the history behind the conflicts was quite superficial. There was a feeling that this lack of knowledge was also shared by many who, at best, displayed very bigoted attitudes and at worst got actively involved in paramilitary activity. It is perhaps worth mentioning that an important element of the Residential weekend was the time spent studying and discussing this history together. This took place prior to the other activities, so that we were all approaching them with some kind of common knowledge base.¹

The image captured by photographer Bridgeen Butler and used on the cover of this issue of *Atlantis* shows participants engaging in a residential weekend in Belfast, Northern Ireland. During their visit to Belfast, the group met with ex-prisoners once active in the political conflict, walked along the Peace Wall and visited the Footprints Women's Centre in a Catholic area of Poleglass and the Shankhill Women's Centre in a Protestant area with the intention of learning from each others' experiences, exploring cultural issues and sharing urban and rural experiences of community organizing.

The Moyle Women's Forum applied to the Moyle District Community Relations Grant scheme for £1,000 to support reciprocal visits from Catholic and Protestant women's groups; but their request was refused by a majority of local Councillors, not including the community relations officer. One Councillor recommended that "we should not spend one penny on this" with another Councillor suggesting that community relations funds would be better spent "in Moyle on community relations for those who live within Moyle."² Their comments clearly demonstrate the difficulties that women's community-based and voluntary groups continue to face in their ongoing efforts to address the political situation in Northern Ireland.

Endnotes

1. For an account of Snapshot on Identity, the group's first photo-voice project, see Katherine Side, "Snapshot on Identity: Women's Community Contributions in a Rural Northern Irish District," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 28.4 (2005): 315-27.
2. "Councillors Say No to Networking Weekend," *Ballymoney and Moyle Times*. June 2003.