Women have long been conspicuous in organisations promoting peace and reconciliation and have been at the forefront of peace-building efforts. Indeed, there are women’s groups the world over whose main focus and rationale is furthering or bringing about peace. This chapter aims to examine this phenomenon in the context of Northern Ireland.

While linkages between women and peace-building have been well established in theory, this chapter will analyse this relationship in the context of women’s integration into theories of civil society, the identification of women’s networks with the nature of social capital and the role of civil society in post-conflict reconstruction. The example of women’s empowerment projects under the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is used to illustrate these linkages between women and peace via civil society involvement.

Women and peace

Examples of women’s organisations engaging in the process of urging, making or building peace are a global phenomenon. Specific studies of peace movements have highlighted the centrality of women to the concept, such as the Derry Peace Women in Northern Ireland, the Women’s Unarmed Uprising Against War in Sweden, the Women’s Peace Union in the United States or the Greenham Peace Camp in the United Kingdom, to name but a few (Alonso, 1997; Andersson, 2003; Hammond, 2002; Harford, 1984). There are also specific studies of women in the context of a conflict area, such as Northern Ireland, or profiles of individual women taken from a variety of conflict areas (Henderson, 1994;
Morgan, 1995). While the promotion of peace is frequently the *raison d'être* of many women's groups worldwide, the same cannot be said of groups of men. Women, therefore, appear to be more conspicuous in the pursuit of peace.

In the international context, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 in 2000 to increase the participation of women in all UN field operations and ensure a gender element in all peace-building initiatives. Clearly, the association of women with peace is considered strong and is internationally recognised, or at least the need to include women more effectively following conflict. The argument for specific gender perspectives in post-conflict situations is put succinctly by Woroniuk and Schalkwyk, stating that gender relations in pre-conflict situations often set the stage for women’s and men’s options during conflict, women and men experience conflict in very different ways, social structures mainly sustained by and relied upon by women are thrown into confusion during conflict and women and men tend to be involved in building peace in different ways, women being involved more in grass roots peace-building and men in formal political processes (Woroniuk and Schalkwyk, 1998, 1). Women’s integration into all peace-building efforts is therefore essential, particularly in the reconstruction of society following conflict.

One explanation of the relationship between women and peace has been that women are naturally more peaceful. Women, writes Johann Galtung, have innate qualities that make them more peace-loving. High in empathy, their characters are horizontal and centripetal, making them more prone to peaceful relationships, combined with the chemical programming of the cyclical and complex oestrogen and high levels of mono amino oxidase, the chemical responsible for controlling violence (Galtung, 1996, 40, 43). Young girls, writes Brock-Utne, tend to share and co-operate, whereas young boys compete (Brock-Utne, 1989, 99). Alonso affirms this notion, insisting that ‘almost every group has portrayed women as more sensitive, more caring, more thoughtful and more committed to producing a more humanistic and compassionate world than men as a whole’ (Alonso, 1993, 11).

In contrast, men are portrayed as makers of war and perpetrators of violence. Galtung cites the low empathy, vertical, centrifugal, expansionist character of man, pointing out that 95 per cent of direct violence is committed by men (Galtung, 1996, 40-1). Something in the nature of men makes them fight, as Skjelsback and Smyth point out: