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The Impact of Conflict on Violence Against Women in Belfast

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By Rachel Green

“Women in conflictual situations know that a cessation of military/political violence does not bring a cessation of all violence.”
(Monica McWilliams 1997: 90)

Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) during and post-conflict is integrally linked to the legacy of the conflict and to the intersectionality of cultural, religious, and gender expectations in Northern Ireland. Through interviews with community members from both communities (loyalists/unionists and republicans/nationalists) and with non-aligned community members as well as analysis of police reports of violence, this paper reports the patterns discovered. During the conflict, victims reported VAW to in-group unofficial justice systems; post-conflict, beginning at the Good Friday Agreement, reporting of VAW to police authorities dramatically increased. VAW in the loyalist and republican communities is more similar than different, but significant community differences do exist.

Keywords: violence against women; gender-based violence; conflict; Northern Ireland; Belfast

Introduction

Many researchers have examined the conflict in Northern Ireland (also known as “the Troubles”), analyzing its impact on inter-group relations today, discussing the impact of peace process policies and programs, and examining the impact of gender, ethnicity, and religion on the conflict and on current post-conflict social and political environments (Ditch and Morrissey, 1992; Browne and Dwyer, 2014; Byrne and Gormley-Heenan, 2014; Doyle and McAreavey, 2014; Dorsett, 2013; Besley and Mueller, 2012; Cochrane, 2015; Sterrett, Hackett, and Hill, 2012). Some have focused specifically on the role of women in the conflict and in post-conflict Northern Ireland, as combatants, as supporters, and as public figures and leaders (McWilliams, 1995; McKeown, 2011; McWilliams and Kilmurray, 2015; Galligan, 2013; Deiana, 2013; Connolly, 1999; Buckley and Galligan, 2013). Few, however, have specifically examined the role of women as victims of violence during the conflict (McWilliams, 1997; Evason, 1981; McWilliams and McKiernan, 1993; Montgomery and Bell, 1986), and those that have typically focus on domestic violence primarily or solely. Community members know that women were victims of intragroup (between members of one group) and intergroup (between members of different groups) sexual and physical violence during the conflict, but due to low reporting rates and the stigma against victims of gender-based violence, little has been documented.

This research sought to expand upon current knowledge by developing a theoretically-based understanding of forms of gender-based violence against women (VAW) during and after the conflict. It seeks to discover community knowledge of patterns of VAW in Belfast as they relate to the lasting impact of the conflict itself. Essentially, this research examines a widely researched topic, VAW, holistically and while uniquely situated within the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. With the exception of Aisling’s Swaine’s research discussed in her new book, *Conflict-Related Violence Against Women* (2018), VAW has not been researched in this context.

I seek to produce a coherent understanding of the environment of VAW in Northern Ireland. In pursuit of this, my research incorporates analysis of data collected by the PSNI and local service providers; information collected from interviews with non-aligned and

with aligned community members; and a review of literature providing context of VAW in general, VAW in conflict and post-conflict societies, and the political divisions and lasting impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Context and Background

I. The Conflict in Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998, also known as ‘The Troubles,’ was, at the root, a violent debate over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. It was not, as it is commonly misunderstood to be, a religious conflict. Two mutually exclusive versions of national identity and national belonging, disputes over territory, and social and political ills all contributed to the decades-long violence between the two major communities. The goal of the unionist/loyalist majority (overwhelmingly Protestant) to remain part of the United Kingdom differed fundamentally from the goal of the nationalist/republican minority (almost exclusively Catholic) to become part of the Republic of Ireland (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). Tensions had been rising between these two groups during the years leading up to 1968, and by that time, both sides took to violence, and a peaceful, governmental solution to their goals was no longer possible. During those 30 years of violence, over 3,600 people were killed and over 36,000 were injured (McWilliams, 1997). By 1998, international intervention succeeded in helping the two communities negotiate and agree to a peace process, now referred to as the Good Friday Agreement.

During the conflict, violence primarily occurred between individuals from different communities – republican paramilitaries targeted the British security forces and loyalists, and loyalist paramilitaries targeted republicans (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). Most violence involved guns, bombs, and other man-made weapons. Some violence was intended to kill; other violence was intended to injure or maim. Most violence was between the communities, but there was some physical violence within each community as well, a result of internal disputes within and between paramilitaries of the same general ideological perspective (McKittrick, Kelters, Feeley, Thornton, and McVea, 1999).

Post-conflict Northern Ireland saw instances of inter-community violence drop dramatically after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the beginning of disarmament. However, violence and conflict do not just *end* after a peace agreement and political transition. Ethnic and gender identities that had contributed to the conflict did not change significantly post-conflict (Hoewer, 2013). If anything, the conflict's glorification of male physical force intensified post-conflict through commemoration and celebration. Parades, anniversaries, martyrs, popular culture of paramilitarism and resistance, murals, writing, song, marching bands, and the lionization of ex-prisoners as heroes deepened inter-ethnic tensions among some communities and strengthened the culture of the strong, violent male. Violence, therefore, subsided but was not eradicated; post-conflict violence and crime simply took on different forms (Howarth, 2014; Jarman, 2004).

Women's gendered experiences in Northern Ireland took on varying forms. During the conflict, women took on a variety of roles as combatants, as smugglers of weapons, and, if married, as breadwinners and caretakers and housemakers while their husbands were in prison. After the Good Friday Agreement, societal expectations pushed women to return to their traditional pre-conflict role. But many women did not return to their traditional roles, which unsettled men and women in both communities. This conflict between the post-conflict transformed female self-perceptions and the "traditional male-dominated gender concepts" led to familial conflict and arguably contributed to the spark in domestic violence post-conflict (Hoewer, 2013, p. 226; McWilliams and McKiernan, 1993). This gender tension, in addition to the ongoing inter-ethnic division and ideological divide between nationalist/republicans and unionist/loyalists, as well as post-conflict paramilitary in-group disputes, economic disadvantage, and residential segregation, exacerbated instances of post-conflict violence, particularly VAW. It is thus important, when discussing the environment of VAW in Northern Ireland during and post-conflict, to acknowledge the intersectionality of women's social status within the fabric of society. A working-class republican paramilitary woman will experience violence differently than a wealthy republican woman. Each of them will experience violence differently than the wife of a working-class loyalist paramilitary member. Ethnicity, ideology, socioeconomic class, and gender all inter-relate and impact any one individual's experience of violence.

II. Gender-Based Violence and Conflict

Gender-based violence, which is usually enacted against women, is violence against a person that is perpetrated because of that person's gender or that disproportionately affects individuals of one gender more than the other. Gender-based violence is a global phenomenon that is context specific.

Gender identities are also relevant to conflict and post-conflict gender relations and forms of violence. Gender-specific qualities are both rebelled against (when women become violent combatants, for example) and conservatized (when women are expected to return to the home post-conflict) during war and conflict (Dowler, 1998; Hoewer, 2013; Schott, 1996). When women are violent actors in a conflict, especially when they are violent against males, it is more shocking and horrific than any male violence: violent women are villainized, turned into monsters and savages by the media and community or portrayed as having little agency (Morrissey, 2003; MacDonald, 1991; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007).

Most researchers seeking to understand VAW in the context of conflict have studied international conflicts; and feminist legal theorists have critiqued how this focus on the interaction between conflict, gendered violence, and international law has created of a 'hierarchy of violence' that "has largely meant that systematic public rape has been given more attention and credence than the violence that appears in women's everyday lives." (Swaine, 2018: 11; Nordstrom, 2004: 58). Aisling Swaine, in her recently-published book, uses the term "conflict-related violence against women" to "allow for the broadest capture of all forms of violence, including [conflict-related sexualized violence], that women may identify and that have a link to armed conflict." (Swaine, 2018: 12-13). The use of this term permits all forms of VAW related to conflict to be considered "harm." It therefore fights the lingering emphasis on more obvious forms of VAW used in conflicts as a way for one community to harm the other and permits all forms of VAW to be analyzed and discussed. I adopt this feminist theory to research and discuss the forms of VAW related to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Women more often than not experience war and conflict as civilians. Their experiences of violence vary widely: a woman might be the mother of a male combatant, might experience the violent death of a husband and be left to sustain the family and endure

loneliness, or might be impacted by the armed conflict as a victim of abuse, rape, or sexual violence. During the conflict, domestic violence in the home continues; political and social violence does not eliminate private violence. There is little research claiming to accurately represent rates of domestic violence during conflict because it is unlikely for victims to be willing to report to security forces that might be involved in the conflict and because many communities prioritize the public conflict over private violence (McWilliams, 1997). After conflict, researchers have shown that reported rates of domestic violence increase rapidly, but whether this means that actual rates increase as well or that victims feel more comfortable reporting is unclear (McWilliams, 2015; Blay-Tofey and Lee, 2015).

III. Women and the Conflict in Northern Ireland

Within the Northern Ireland context, VAW was influenced by the legacy of the political conflict by women's lack of representation in politics, by cultural and religious norms, and by economic and political inequalities (McWilliams, 2015). Women's sexual reproductive capabilities were specifically targeted when women were in prison during the conflict: they were denied access to sanitary materials, subjected to internal medical exams while pregnant, and refused permission to change protection during menstruation (Swaine, 2011). However, unlike many other conflicts, women were not targeted for sexual violence as part of the inter-group conflict in Northern Ireland. Women were victims of VAW from paramilitary perpetrators, but these overwhelmingly were instances of in-group violence (Swaine, 2011).

The intersection of ethnicity, ideology, and gender impacted VAW in Northern Ireland. Loyalist masculinity has been dominated by hypermasculine values of patriarchal power (Magee, 2013; Potter, 2014). There was little room for women within the loyalist paramilitary sphere: Loyalist women, during the conflict, "mirroring a sexual division of labour in the home...[were] expected to support the activities of men in the public sphere by carrying the tools of their trade, while being kept in the dark about the nature and purpose of their task" (Potter, 2014, p. 264). Women's roles in loyalist violence were thus gendered: women were responsible for fundraising, nursing, smuggling weapons, and being 'honeytraps' for enemy men.

Republican masculinity is directly similar in its emphasis on hypermasculinity, patriarchal power, strength, and violence. A key difference is that republican masculinity and paramilitary culture did have room for women combatants and for female violence. Republican women still tended to perform gendered roles in the violence such as smuggling bombs through the city center in their clothes, but they were also violent actors tasked with directing, recruiting, and patrolling (Swaine, 2011; McEvoy, 2009). Women's involvement in violence in both communities tended to be different from men's, but it was more readily accepted into republican masculinity than into loyalist masculinity (Ashe, Harland, 2014; Magee, 2013).

When domestic violence occurred during the conflict, women faced severe barriers to reporting, such as the 10-minute waiting period (if a woman called to report domestic violence, she had to call again in 10 minutes to prevent hoaxes and ambushes, leaving time for the man to do something such as rip the phone out of the wall) (Hume and Wilding, 2014). Another factor contributing to low reporting rates of VAW during the conflict was the cultural discomfort with invading the privacy of the home by looking into accusations of domestic violence (McWilliams, 1997). VAW during the conflict, therefore, was severely under-reported and under-researched and is a major focus of this author's research.

IV. Women and Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

Gender also plays a role in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Gender norms dictate that women are supposed to be peacemakers post-conflict (Potter, 2014) and were not supposed to be involved as violent actors in the first place (Morrissey, 2003; MacDonald, 1991; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). In Northern Ireland, structural inequalities such as economic instability and restrictive gender norms disproportionately affected women in post-conflict Northern Ireland and made it difficult both for them to recover from the trauma of the conflict and to be involved in their public and social representation to aid in this process (McKeown, 2011; McWilliams, 1997; McEvoy, 2009).

After the conflict, reporting rates of domestic VAW skyrocketed (McWilliams, 2015), possibly due to a variety of factors that include the rapid reduction of sectarian violence and shift of women's attention from addressing public to private, home violence.

It is possible that actual rates of VAW did increase in the years following the 1998 peace agreement, due to factors such as the return of male political prisoners from prison expecting their wives to return to their traditional gender roles post-conflict and the inability of ex-paramilitary men to perform their hypermasculinity in ways that had previously been rewarded by the community. This research hopes to add to existing knowledge on this particular aspect of VAW.

This paper approaches VAW from a feminist intersectional perspective, discussing and acknowledging how the many environmental factors in Northern Ireland may have impacted patterns of VAW and of reporting of VAW during and post-conflict. It seeks to discover the impact of the conflict on types and causes of VAW. It also addresses the extent to which the two major communities are similar or different in terms of rates and types of VAW both during and post-conflict.

Methodology

I. Research Questions and Hypotheses

My questions included, broadly: what was the environment of in-group VAW during and after the conflict in Belfast? Did the conflict and its lasting political and ideological rifts impact rates and patterns of VAW in Belfast? Are there differences in patterns of perpetration and reporting rates between the two major communities?

My hypotheses were as follows: Most offenses of VAW are and were perpetrated by in-group members (*H1*), not out-group members, indicating that sexual violence is not and was not being used as a conflict strategy. Comparing the two major communities in Belfast, there will be differences in their patterns of reporting as well as in community perceptions of the forms and causes of VAW (*H2*). When VAW occurs between in-group members, during the conflict it was rarely reported to government authorities and was instead handled by in-group unofficial justice systems (*H3*); in parts of each major community (nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist) today, many cases still go unreported to officials and are handled internally (*H4*). Finally, comparing patterns of VAW during and post-

conflict in Belfast across both communities, there will be differences in reporting rates and in the immediate causes of VAW, but the forms of VAW and frequency in reality will remain mostly unchanged (*H5*).

II. Research Design

I collected two main sources of data: quantitative statistics and qualitative interviews. I gathered police statistics (from the PSNI) of reports of VAW since 2002. The bulk of my evidence-collection was conducted via descriptive interviews. I decided to interview people from three categories: (1) Non-aligned service providers and community members, (2) Community members in the loyalist/unionist/Protestant community, and (3) Community members in the republican/nationalist/Catholic community.

Category (1) “Service Provider/Non-Aligned” includes non-aligned service providers and individuals involved in prevention and/or research of sexual violence in Belfast. Members of this interview category are not professionally or personally tied to one ‘group’ (republican or loyalist). Category (2) “Loyalist/Unionist” includes community members who are active primarily or entirely with the loyalist/unionist/Protestant community in Belfast, and Category (3) “Republican/Nationalist” includes community members who are active primarily or entirely with the republican/nationalist/Catholic community. Community members in categories (2) and (3) are general community members – they might be political representatives, service providers serving one community exclusively or more often than the other, ex-members of a paramilitary organization or affiliate, researchers examining the dynamics of the political group, or community leaders working on peace and conflict transformation.

I conducted loosely-structured descriptive interviews to allow participants to have the freedom to tell their story. I transcribed each interview and then identified and systematized common themes in the narratives to simplify the information discovered in the interviews.

Data Collection

I. Methods

I interviewed 5 participants from Category (1), 6 participants from Category (2), and 2 participants from Category (3) for a total of 13 participants.

After transcribing and coding and organizing responses by themes for easier reference, I assigned each participant an Identification Code, which is used in this paper to refer to each participant. Those in Category (1) were assigned the ID Code “S” for “Service provider/non-aligned”: S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5. Those in Category (2) were assigned the ID Code “L” for “Loyalist/unionist”: L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, and L6. Those in Category (3) were assigned the ID Code “R” for “Republican/nationalist”: R1 and R2. “Table 2: Interview Participants” displays this information.

Category	Description	Number Interviewed	ID Codes
Category (1)	"Service Provider/Non-Aligned"	5	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5
Category (2)	"Loyalist/Unionist"	6	L1, L2, L3, L4, L5
Category (3)	"Republican/Nationalist"	2	R1, R2

After transcription, I read through each transcribed interview and pulled out themes and discrepancies between interviews. I organized these themes into the following section, where I draw heavily on the interviews themselves and also incorporate some of the available data on reported rates of VAW in Belfast.

II. Limitations

In the interest of creating a balanced set of interviews from both communities, I had initially reached out to equal numbers of community members from both Category (2) and (3), but those in Category (3) were not as receptive to agree to interviews and were less likely to return phone calls and emails. I cannot say with certainty why the republican community members I contacted were more unwilling to speak to me than others, but the

extremely low number of interviewees from the republican community is undoubtedly a weakness of this research.

As an outsider in this community (I am from the United States of America), I have a unique positionality in the context of this research. I benefited from my outsider position in that local community members and leaders were often willing to speak to me because I did *not* know their story; they were eager to share. But I was also harmed from my outsider position because some community members were unwilling to speak to someone they do not trust about such a sensitive topic. I cannot change my positionality as an outsider to this community, so I can only acknowledge its potential positive and negative impact on my ability to conduct thorough, comprehensive research.

Results

I. Women's Roles in the Community: During and Post-Conflict

During the conflict, women were the primary home-makers and family caretakers. Men were expected to be the warriors and the protectors of both communities, and when they were imprisoned by the thousands due to their involvement in the conflict, women were left at home to support the family and community; they therefore filled a literal void during the conflict (L4). Women held the community together, not only supporting their own families, but also often organizing with other women to support the men in prison and families in need (L1, R2). There still exist powerful stereotypes of women during the conflict as strong caretakers of families and communities (L2).

Women's roles in paramilitaries were also gendered. Both communities' paramilitary organizations were highly masculine and militaristic (L3, L4, L6). Despite the expectations for women to remain traditionally feminine, they became involved in paramilitaries, but their capability to participate violently in the conflict differed between the two communities.

Republican women's relative flexibility to engage violently within republican paramilitaries, compared to loyalist female paramilitaries, did not occur accidentally:

republican women fought throughout the conflict for equality within their own organizations as well as in the wider society (R2).

They didn't push down the doors, far from it, but women pushed the doors open, saying... 'If you expect us to carry the gun and then give it to a man to shoot, yeah, think again. If we're going to carry the gun, you know we get caught we're still going to get a life sentence so we might as well be the ones who actually hold it, point it, and shoot it.' – R2

Despite these efforts, women's roles within republican paramilitaries still emphasized their gender. Republican women were known to use their sexuality to lure opposing males into 'honey traps' wherein a republican woman would pick up a British soldier or loyalist paramilitary at a bar and would take him back to her flat, where her fellow republican paramilitary members would capture, interrogate, and sometimes torture the man (L2). Republican women living across from Divis Towers would sometimes undress in front of open windows to draw the attention of the soldiers on camera duty on the top floors. Once the cameras were turned towards the women, paramilitary members below could move weapons from one location to another without being seen by the distracted soldiers (L2). Because women were less likely to be thoroughly checked than men and were therefore able to transport weapons more easily, they often carried weapons across roadblocks in their clothes or in baby prams (L2). Republican female paramilitaries were involved in violent and dangerous operations alongside men, but they still performed disproportionately in these gendered, feminized roles.

Loyalist female paramilitaries had less community support to be violent and were sometimes even discouraged from violence. After the women's Ulster Defense Association (UDA) was involved in the murder of another woman in 1974,

There was such an outrage about that particular murder that the men's UDA shut down the women's UDA...It wasn't like the UDA were [good boys]...they were [brutal] murderers themselves but what they were saying...was that we don't want

our women doing this sort of stuff...It's not the role of a woman to [beat] the other woman to death. – L6

Loyalist women still did engage in violent behavior within paramilitaries, but it was not the norm and is not well-known (L6). Most loyalist women were expected to take on roles that were considered more feminine and less violent (L3, L4), such as the supporting jobs performed by the ‘welfare division:’

The military division are the [ones] who do all [the] hardcore violent dirty work. The welfare division are the people who run all the other aspects of things so that [includes] things like [painting] murals, everything from cleaning graves to fundraising. – L6

Women performed other gendered roles in addition to those supporting jobs, utilizing their sexuality in particular. Loyalist women acted as ‘honey traps’ for republican men and their fundraising roles sometimes emphasized their sexuality: “one talked about how she would’ve put like hot pants on and walked into like all the loyalist bars and like asked for donations [sic]” (L6).

After the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, women’s roles in the community changed significantly. Men returning from prison and from their violent paramilitary roles took back their positions as leaders in the workplace and in the community, often directly pushing women out of leadership roles (L1, L2). Male-led organizations working to reintegrate paramilitary men into the community gained membership and participation over the next 18 years (L3, L4, L5, L6), although renegade paramilitaries to this day work to undermine these efforts (L3, L4, L6). In Northern Ireland, there is a culture of males volunteering to lead more than females: “I think a lot of it is just down to culture, the culture of Northern Ireland, the culture of Great Britain probably in general, [it’s] men who’ll put their head above and say I’ll do that, I’ll do that” (L1). Additionally, many women experienced mental health issues such as anxiety and depression post-conflict (R1, S2): “After the peace agreement was signed, it was as if the women in North Belfast underwent

a collective nervous breakdown, because for like 30 years they'd just been waiting on a knock on the door" (L3).

II. Forms and Causes of Violence Against Women During Conflict

Most interviewees discussed domestic violence as the primary known form of VAW during the conflict (L1, L3, L4, L5, R1, S1, S2, S3, S5). Some participants discussed sexual violence and specifically rape by either family members or paramilitary male members (L1, L3, L5, S5). Interviewees regarded both the forms and causes of VAW during the conflict in each community to be nearly identical. However, there were some slight differences between communities that will be discussed below.

VAW was not systematically targeted against women of the 'out-group;' loyalists and republicans did not commit VAW or sexual violence against the women of the other group. This differentiates this conflict from many other ethnic and ideological conflicts around the world. Some participants thought that Northern Ireland is different in this respect because of its culture of protecting and honoring women (L2, L6). This is also cited as a reason for women's different treatment even in cases of in-group VAW-as-punishment: in-group violent punishments of female paramilitaries in the republican community involved public humiliation and the tarring and feathering of women instead of the kneecappings or beatings reserved for male members (R1, L2).

While outgroup VAW was not a strategy of either community during the conflict, women were disproportionately harmed by two forms of violence that impacted outgroup individuals. Firstly, republican women in prison during the conflict were often subjected to invasive body searches (R2). Secondly, loyalist women were disproportionately the victims of republican bombs left in stores: women employees were usually responsible for checking the stores before opening and were most likely to be present if a bomb went off (L2). In general, despite these examples of VAW that disproportionately affected specifically women from one community or the other, there was not a systematic or strategic targeting of women as recipients of violence because of their gender by either community.

Another community-specific form of VAW was the internal republican paramilitary punishment of women for associating with soldiers or upon suspicion of being a spy. This took the aforementioned form of tarring and feathering (R1), although some women were also ‘disappeared’ (L4). Loyalist paramilitary punishments for female members did not include, as in the republican community, tarring and feathering, public humiliation, or disappearances, but women might have been excluded from the community if they did not remain faithful to their husband in prison (L4).

Most VAW during the conflict in both the republican communities and loyalist communities took the form of family domestic violence (R1; L6). Although it was well known that domestic violence occurred regularly within the community, it was rarely talked about during the conflict (L6) because, particularly in the paramilitary organizations, the community was at war: “Some of them [loyalist paramilitary members] have mentioned [anecdotally] that during the conflict [they] just wouldn’t have known it went off, because they’re all in war mode” (L3).

The conflict did influence the prevalence of VAW, particularly domestic violence, in both communities. Many interviewees cited ‘spillover’ violence from the conflict as directly influencing home violence, making it difficult for violent actors in the conflict to ‘switch off’ at home (R1, S1, S3, L3, L6).

So you had this kind of enormous culture of violence which was created by the conflict which just sort of poured over into everywhere else. [It] poured over into the streets, into family life, into the home, and so what I found during the research was that [the] same people who were [conducting] the violence on behalf of the paramilitaries were also violent in the home and were also violent [to] their partners, [to] their children. – L6

Interviewees also pointed to the influence of hyper-masculinity, militarism, and a lack of support for men returning from prison (S1, L3, L6). Some loyalist women defended male perpetrators, saying that they were under a considerable amount of pressure during the conflict (L6). One interviewee said that the conflict as well as the cultural environment in Northern Ireland influenced patterns of VAW:

The high levels of religion, high focus on the family, keeping the family together, and kind of masculine dominant political culture that we have in public life generally, I think all of that's led into gender roles that are subservient for women and that naturally lead to patterns of violence. – S1

The impact of conservative attitudes and shame and stigma around personal and sexual life (S2, S5); the wider cultural expectation for the woman to keep the family together (S1); and the economic situation of women not having access to money to help them leave an abusive home (S3) were all cited as additional factors, not directly related to the conflict, that influenced VAW during and after the conflict. Some perpetrators said that watching their own fathers harm their mothers influenced their future decisions (L6). The religious and cultural pressure for women to remain in a marriage, no matter how abusive, was discussed again and again (R1, S1, S2, S3, S5):

It's a real, or it was I guess, a real statement to leave your family in this kind of religious community and close kind of small village or small town it's a big statement to go and divorce your husband. – S1

I've women say things like that like a priest or a minister would say 'No, you're married. You're married for life!' and 'Try and work it out.' 'You made your bed, you have to lie in it,' that attitude. – S2

The conflict and the surrounding cultural and religious environment was repeatedly cited as a contributing factor to all forms of VAW, even though there was not, as in many other divisive violent conflicts, systematic targeting of women in the 'other' community as victims of VAW.

III. Forms and Causes of Violence Against Women Post-Conflict

VAW occurred post-conflict for many of the same reasons as it did during the conflict. The major difference is that interviewees discussed only domestic or sexual violence as forms of post-conflict VAW (R1, L3, L5, S2, S3).

New forms of VAW in present-day Belfast include sexual violence at youth parties (S2) and an increase in peer-on-peer sexual violence and coercion at schools (S5). Sexual violence and emotional and psychological abuse are increasingly recognized as increasing forms of domestic violence (S2, S3), and since women's access to money within the marriage has not significantly changed, financial abuse probably increased post-conflict (R1, S2, S3). However, physical violence still best convinces the community that a woman's claims of abuse are truthful: "If you're battered and bleeding, then, then you have something to go on" (S3).

Many interviewees mentioned the relationship between ex-paramilitary members and VAW post-conflict. Some women report being threatened by paramilitary members when they try to end abusive or unwanted relationships with a paramilitary man (S2). Many interviewees discussed the relationship between paramilitary members' access to weapons and the prevalence of domestic violence within both communities (L1, L2, L3, S1, S3, S4, S5), and some cited the mass release of paramilitaries from prison (L1, L2) as a possible cause of increased reporting of domestic violence post-conflict.

IV. Reporting Violence Against Women During the Conflict

During the conflict, VAW was rarely reported, whether it be to police, to paramilitaries, or to community members. During the conflict, there were many threats to any individual's life, and domestic abuse rarely came to the forefront of concerns (S5).

During the, the Troubles, [the conflict], domestic violence was just put to the background...Well you were living in a warzone, everyone's needs were food, shelter, safety, I mean [you're] not worried about '[he] called me names' or, 'I can't get out of the house because I'm controlled or policed at home.' I think that

[those] fears were put down. It was, 'have we got a roof over our head?', 'is it safe to get the kids to school?' [That] violence that women lived in or that everybody lived in, that came first, I think and then I think that issues at home would have been shoved to the background. – S2

Additionally, women in both communities were unable to report to the police if they lived in certain areas because the police just could not access some parts of Belfast. Such women often chose to report to the local paramilitary instead (S2, S5). Other barriers to reporting existed: the perpetrator himself might have been a police informant (S2) or in a paramilitary (S5), making it difficult for the victim to be taken seriously. Women in both communities were sometimes explicitly or implicitly threatened not to go the police or speak outside the community about domestic violence, especially if it involved paramilitary members (S1, S4, L1, L3). One woman, after she reported her rape by a paramilitary man to the chemist, was threatened by paramilitary members and committed suicide the next day:

The alleged rape of the young woman a couple years back by one of the East Belfast guys... Well she committed suicide straight after. So she, she was allegedly raped like, in the last couple of days she was, and she then got a visit from the guy and someone else who threatened her, and she went I think it was to a chemist the next day with the names of the people who threatened her and the guy who'd done it and then she killed herself, and he was never charged. – L3

During the conflict, when republican and loyalist women victims of VAW did report to local paramilitaries, they sometimes conducted internal investigations (R2, S5, L3). If a man was found guilty of VAW, a common punishment was a fine. If a man was found guilty of other 'anti-social' actions such as robbery, he might be punished with summary justice which could include a beating or kneecapping (L3, L4), a punishment often seen as something the community wanted and supported (R1, L4). The biggest problem with internal paramilitary policing was bias: if the victim herself was a member,

particularly a prominent member, this bias would favor her; but if the perpetrator was a member, this bias would favor him (R1).

There were also slight variations between the communities. Republican women were particularly unwilling to report VAW to the police because of a lack of trust in the mostly-Protestant police (R1, S3, S5) and because of the common perception that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) would handle VAW better than the police (R1).

V. Reporting Post-Conflict

Women in both communities are still largely unwilling to report VAW. Some say this is due to a continued fear of repercussions from the community for seeking help outside the family and community or because some women's spouses are still involved in a paramilitary (S2). Many republican women are unwilling to report because of lack of trust in the PSNI still, even since its early-2000's reorganization to include police officers from both communities (R1, S3, S5). Some reports of VAW in the republican community are thus still dealt with internally (S5).

I received conflicting reports about whether loyalist paramilitaries still handle reports of VAW internally. One interviewee said that they most certainly do, and that some would say they do so better than the police (L3). Another said that loyalist paramilitaries post-conflict actually encourage women to report directly to the police and do not handle cases of VAW internally whatsoever:

It would be a myth or a fallacy to suggest that, for example, 'I'm a former paramilitary and I'm beating my wife, it doesn't necessarily follow that I would be protected in some way should she go to the police,' particularly [now], [that's] certainly not the case. I have sat in rooms where known leading figures in paramilitaries have said face-to-face with the police that if you suspect anyone within the ranks of this organization that's involved in criminal activity, no matter what it is, you should bring the letter of the law down on them. – LA

I also received conflicting reports about whether loyalist paramilitaries are still performing summary justice. It is likely that they did continue to perform summary justice, with considerable support from the wider community, for many years post-1998. There still exists, in a minority but still a significant portion of loyalist areas in Belfast, community support for summary justice (L2, L4, L5, L6), possibly due to its long-standing role in loyalist culture (L2) and to the perception of the police as not being very effective (L5). Several interviewees noted that now, thanks to organizations like Alternatives, which receives referrals from community members about individuals harming the community through anti-social behavior and meets with them and with aggrieved community members through a process called restorative justice, and the Action for Community Transformation (ACT) Initiative, which helps train former paramilitary members to engage in the community through restorative justice and other community functions, paramilitaries largely do not perform summary justice (L4, L5).

Before Alternatives and ACT were as widely accepted in the community, however, paramilitary organizations were known to be involved in the reporting of VAW (L3). In such cases, as with republican paramilitaries, an important factor in the case was who the victim and perpetrator were in relation to paramilitary membership. Perpetrator members were protected by their paramilitary connections (S3, L6), but if a man beat the wife of a paramilitary leader, there would be an investigation (L6). If a man was found to be guilty, “They would be subject to like violence or other forms of punishment if they’re found out to be beating a woman” (L3).

Regardless of community affiliation, reports of VAW to the police and to service-providers unambiguously increased after the peace agreement of 1998 (L1, L2, L6, S1). According to the earliest available PSNI data on reported domestic incidents, in 2002/03 there were 15,512 incidents reported; in 2014/15 there were 28,287 incidents reported, revealing a continued increase in reporting since at least 2002, shown below in “Table 3: PSNI Statistics 2002-2015” (PSNI, 2004; PSNI, 2015).

Year	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Reported domestic abuse incidents	15,512	16,926	20,959	23,059	23,456	23,076	23,591	24,482	25,685	25,196	27,190	27,628	28,287

PSNI, 2004; PSNI, 2015

Interviewees disagree about whether the increase in reports reflects an increase in actual VAW. Some said that actual incidents of VAW did increase post-conflict:

The Westminster Inquiry when we had the closed sessions, with women from various communities, and various cultures, [talking] to us about the increase in their community in sexual violence...They were just there just to tell their story, that this is what it's like living in my community post 1998, this is the increase we've had in, in violence against women, including sexual violence. – L1

Others do not know why reports of VAW increased post-conflict but say that the reported numbers of VAW are still extremely low (S2, S4, S5). Some do not know whether actual rates of VAW increased post-conflict (L1, L6, S2, S4, S5) but think that other factors can explain the increase in reports (L2, S2, S3, S4, S5). The makeup of the police changed dramatically post-1998 from the mostly-Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary to the more balanced PSNI (R1). This, combined with the PSNI's continued evolution in its approach to sexual violence and domestic violence and its progressiveness on the topic, relative to wider Northern Irish culture, have likely encouraged women's reporting of VAW (L1, S1, S2, S3, S5). Increased availability of resources for women survivors of VAW through organizations such as Women's Aid and the Rowan could also influence a woman's likelihood of reporting (L1, L5, S3). The publicity around sexual abuse scandals such as Jimmy Savile, the Donagh boys, and Maria Cahill could also encourage women to report, as they might see others coming forward and feel more comfortable doing the same (S5). Repeatedly, interviewees would say that domestic violence is not seen as culturally acceptable post-conflict (S1, S2, L1, L3, L6). One reason for this is that domestic violence was not talked about during the conflict, but it is now (S4). Campaigning by service

organizations, confidence in the reporting process and in the police, knowledge that the government is taking VAW seriously, public discourse about sexual violence, education on sexual behavior, and the absence of the other dangers present during the conflict were all cited as reasons for women to feel more comfortable reporting post-conflict (S3, S4, L6). Paramilitaries are supposedly doing work internally to address gender and the problem of VAW (L3), and paramilitary masculinity has necessarily transformed post-conflict (L6).

While reporting of VAW has increased post-conflict, interviewees also shared their thoughts on why reporting might still be lower than actual rates of VAW. Victims of VAW still internalize considerable cultural shame and guilt (S5, R2). Paramilitary power is still used to threaten women to remain silent (L1), whether through real or made-up connections: “We’re hearing lots of people say that they have connections when they haven’t” (S3). Some women choose not to report out of concern for their partner’s criminal record (S1), for fear of disrupting the family or workplace (S4), or because they fear the trauma of the prosecution process (S1, S3, S5). One service provider said that General Practitioners (GP’s) also have a role, and that if they would ask women if they have been harmed by their husband or partner, women might report:

I’ve asked: “If your GP asked you outright, if the GP turned around and said, ‘Is somebody hurting you?,’ ‘Is your husband violent?,’ that they said, ‘oh yeah well, actually I probably would’ve said something.’ – S3

Conclusion and Implications

I. Evaluation of Hypotheses

From the information gathered from my interviews, it is clear that the environment of VAW in Belfast, both during and post-conflict, is a complicated one, integrally related to the conflict, to religious and cultural pressures, to the public perception of the police, and to the presence of paramilitary organizations. My hypotheses about the environment of VAW in Belfast were strong.

My first hypothesis (*H1: Most offenses of VAW are and were perpetrated by in-group members, not out-group members, indicating that sexual violence is and was not being used as a conflict strategy*) was repeatedly shown to be correct according to interviewee statements. Most VAW in Belfast both during and after the conflict was perpetrated by in-group members, by husbands, family members, and fellow paramilitary members, not by out-group members as a systematic form of violence against the other community.

My second hypothesis (*H2: there will be community differences in patterns of reporting as well as in community perceptions of the forms and causes of VAW*) was partly accurate. To address the second part of *H2* first: there were some differences in the forms and causes of VAW between the two communities, as shown in Table 4 in the previous section. During the conflict, republican women were at a greater risk to receive violence from the state or other community. Republican women were also known to have been publicly humiliated, tarred, and feathered by republican paramilitaries for associating with men from the ‘other’ community. Therefore, there were community differences in the forms and causes of VAW during the conflict. But from interviewees’ statements, women’s experiences of domestic violence and of most VAW, both during and post-conflict, had little to do with their particular community. VAW instead related to many cultural, religious, and political factors including the masculine and militaristic paramilitary organizations, the availability of weapons, the return of released prisoners to the community post-1998, conservative religious values emphasizing the importance of staying in a marriage at all costs, and the shame and stigma around sexual and personal life.

The second part of *H2* is thus partly accurate: there were some differences between the communities in the forms and causes of VAW during the conflict. The republican and loyalist communities in Belfast place similar emphasis on the importance of ethnic, cultural, and religious ties and expectations; in both communities, the gender of women is key to their role within the community. But women in republican communities did experience VAW differently than women in loyalist communities. Both during and post-conflict, republican women were less likely to report to the police primarily due to lack of trust of state officials. This community difference is integrally related to the cultural and

ideological differences between these communities: republican individuals, especially during the conflict, absolutely would not trust state officials or the RUC. In general, however, the women in both communities had similar experiences in reporting VAW. During the conflict, very few women reported VAW, especially in-group domestic violence, although it occurred in both communities. In some cases, paramilitaries from both sides discouraged women from reporting to the police or even threatened them not to report.

This information largely confirms my third hypothesis (*H3: When VAW occurred, during the conflict it was rarely reported to government authorities and was instead handled by in-group unofficial justice systems*), as women in both communities were reluctant to report to anybody during the conflict, and VAW was sometimes handled by in-group unofficial justice systems. Women in both communities are still reluctant to report, although reporting has increased dramatically post-1998, indicating that the violence of the conflict itself was in some way affecting women's desire or ability to report VAW, or that actual cases of VAW have increased post-conflict, or both. Today, most women who do report do so to the PSNI, but some women are still discouraged from reporting by paramilitary organizations. Further, some paramilitaries might still handle cases of VAW internally. This information partly confirms my fourth hypothesis (*H4: In parts of each main community today, many cases still go unreported to officials and are handled internally*): many cases definitely still go unreported to officials, but in actuality, very few are handled internally by paramilitary organizations.

My fifth and final hypothesis (*H5: Comparing patterns of VAW during and post-conflict in Belfast across both communities, there will be differences in reporting rates and in the immediate causes of VAW, but the forms of VAW and frequency in reality will remain mostly unchanged*) has been largely confirmed by all of the above information. There were differences in reporting rates during and post-conflict: post-conflict, reported rates of VAW increased dramatically. There were also differences in the immediate causes of VAW, in that interviewees did acknowledge the role that the conflict had played in VAW during and post-conflict. However, the major forms of VAW during and post-conflict remained unchanged: the majority of VAW is and was domestic violence. Finally, it is hard to say whether the actual frequency of VAW has increased along with rising reported rates of

VAW post-conflict. There are likely a wide variety of factors explaining this reporting increase, one of which is that actual rates may have indeed increased with the end of the conflict. Overall, reporting rates and influencing factors of VAW did change from those during the conflict to those post-conflict, but domestic violence remains the most frequent form of VAW both during and post-conflict.

II. Implications

The environment of VAW in Belfast is and has been influenced by the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland. There are differences in the reporting patterns, forms, and causes of VAW between the two major communities in Belfast that are integrally related to the unique way that the conflict and its related divisions have influenced the community. The intersection of ethnicity, ideology, culture, gender expectations, and the roles of women as leaders, home-makers, and violent paramilitary members all influence the similarities and differences in VAW between these communities.

During the conflict, interviewees confirmed that women's roles were inherently gendered. Women were expected to be feminine; traditional socio-cultural pressures dictated this. Yet many women took on traditionally-masculine leadership roles in their communities and took on violent roles within paramilitaries. However, even within these roles, women's engagement was gendered in the way that their bodies and gender were used as a weapon (e.g. honey-traps) or a smuggling disguise. Many interviewees reported 'spillover' violence from the conflict itself: domestic and sexual violence in homes related to the extreme violence playing out between the parties to the conflict. But during the conflict, women were reluctant to report to the police. Would a report be taken seriously? And for republican/nationalist woman, was it safe to involve the police at all? This led most women to report within their communities.

After the conflict, interviewees reported increased incidents of domestic and sexual violence at least in part attributable to the release of thousands of men from behind bars. And the legacy of the conflict continues to affect women's experiences with violence even today: PSNI reporting has continued to increase year after year. But interviewees suspect

that actual rates of violence might be even higher than those reported: some women still report exclusively within their community, and many do not feel comfortable reporting.

Overall, patterns of VAW differed during and post-conflict, indicating that some forms of VAW were integrally tied to the influence of the violence itself and to the involvement of paramilitary organizations. However, the most common form of VAW, domestic violence, steadily and indiscriminately affected all communities: republican and loyalist, paramilitary and not, during and post-conflict. All interviewees expressed concern at the increasing reporting rates of VAW but were encouraged that society has changed over the decades to be more encouraging of reporting. Most feel that in the future, women will continue to feel comfortable coming forward and that VAW will continue to be seen as abominable in the wider Northern Irish culture. I wonder whether these interviewees' perspectives have changed any in recent years and months with the rise of the #metoo movement and ever-increasing publicity around women's reports of sexual violence.

This research has shown that while the conflict has influenced the environment of VAW in Belfast, VAW in general and domestic violence specifically is non-discriminatory: it impacts women of all cultures and backgrounds, in all types of societies, conflict-ridden or at peace. However, understanding how the conflict and the intersectionality of women's experiences in the community influences VAW can help service-providers and the community continue to work towards change.

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