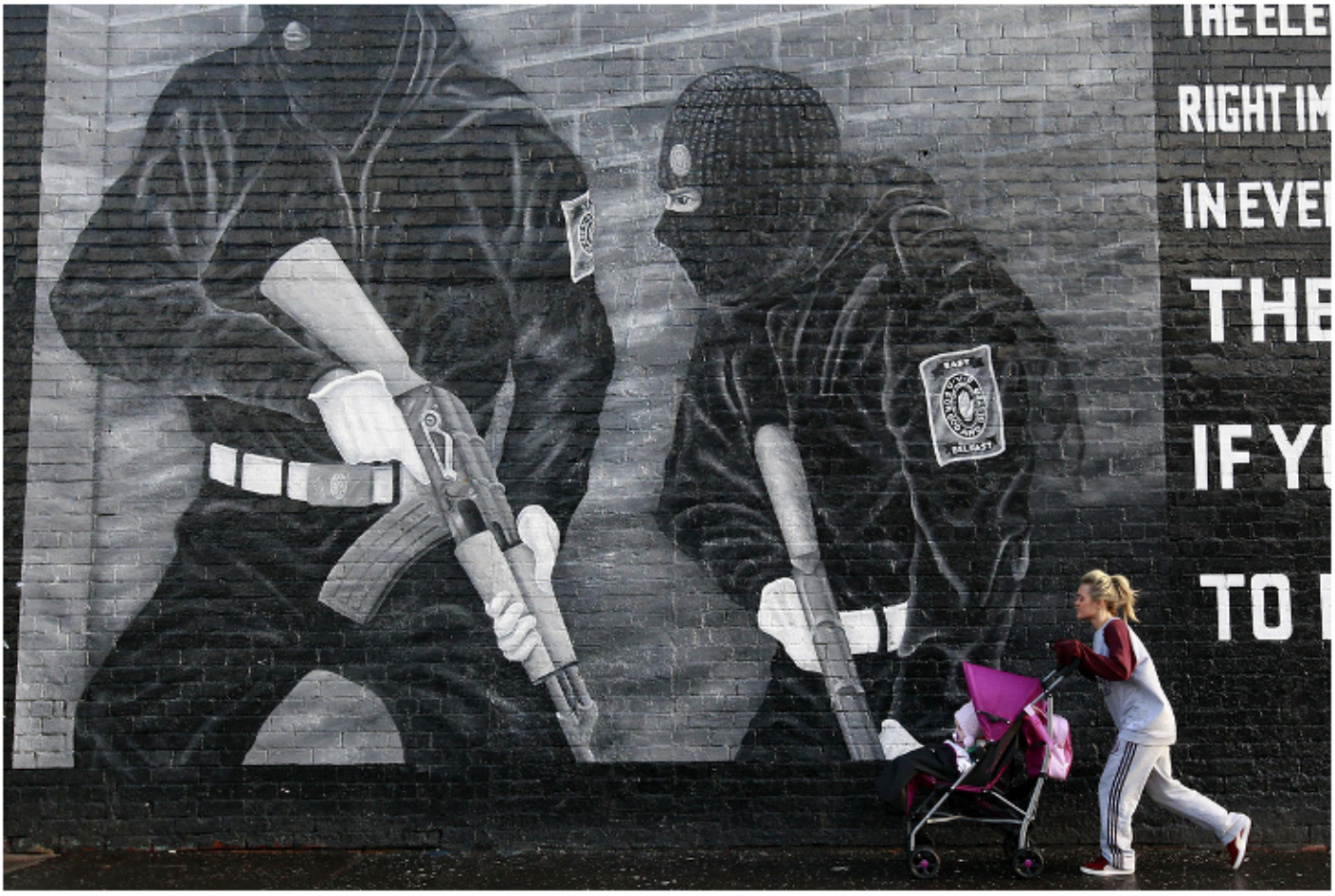
FAR FROM POST-CONFLICT

A Gendered Analysis of Paramilitary Coercive Control in Northern Ireland



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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Cooperation Ireland
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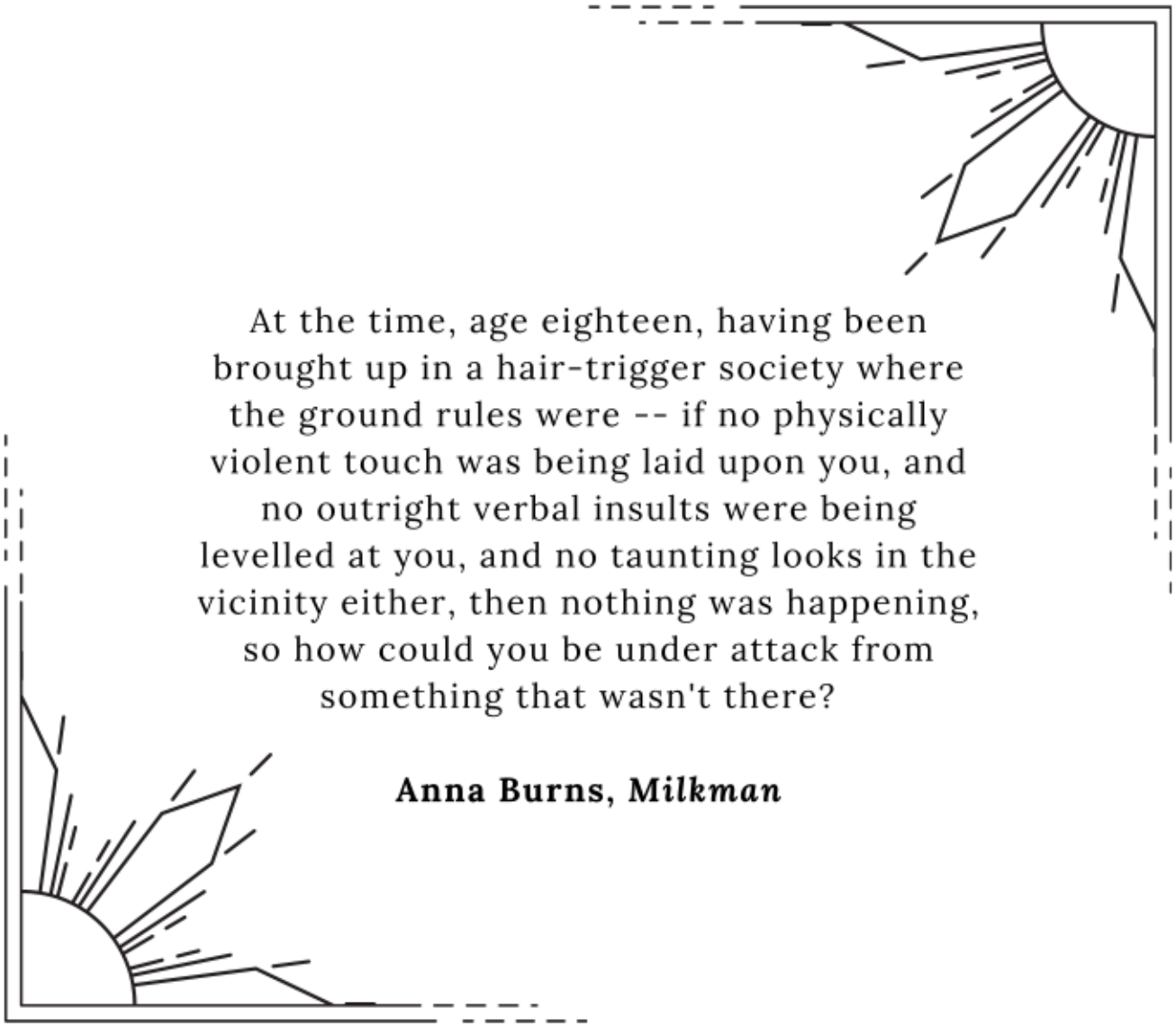

At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were -- if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there?

Anna Burns, *Milkman*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Communities in Transition team at Cooperation Ireland for supporting this research and making me feel so welcome. Thank you, especially, to Lucy Geddes for reading multiple drafts and prioritizing this project every step of the way. And finally, thank you to my amazing participants, whose work makes Northern Ireland a more equitable place for those often excluded by 'the peace'. Your formidable commitment to peacebuilding and gender equality will continue to lead this nation forward.

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Credit: HUGH RUSSEL FOR *THE IRISH TIMES*

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Efforts to understand and address coercive control by paramilitary groups (loan sharking, psychological intimidation and abuse, threat of violence) disproportionately focus on young men in Northern Ireland. Feminist groups like the Women's Policy Group have drawn attention to gaping societal gender disparities and historic rates of violence against women that don't garner the same attention and financial resources (2020). This study, in collaboration with Cooperation Ireland, aims to explore the gap in research and knowledge around the gendered dynamics of paramilitary intimidation and control, paying attention to the ways economic and psychological control inflicts violence on women's everyday lives.

METHODOLOGY

- Literature Review: a look at existing research on paramilitary coercive control.
- 10 semi-structured interviews with academics, leaders in the women's sector, and statutory sector members.

FINDINGS

DEBT BONDAGE

Debt bondage or loan-sharking activity is at the core of most paramilitary coercive control against women. Interviewees stressed that illegal lending is, at its core, a poverty and austerity issue.

THREAT OF VIOLENCE

Voluntary sector representatives said that women reported verbal threats of physical violence from paramilitaries or heard rumours that paramilitaries would kneecap them or force them from their homes if they failed to repay their loans. In some cases, interviewees said that when women could not repay their loans they were able 'pay' in other ways including prostitution or smuggling drugs.

MINORITY GROUPS

It's critical to note that paramilitary coercive control, though it directly impacts women, is equally pervasive among LGBTQ and ethnic minority groups. According to PSNI data, racially motivated crimes outnumbered sectarian crimes in 2021 (PSNI and NISRA). These figures represent a new reality for Northern Ireland, where sectarianism, homophobia, misogyny, and racism are all intricately interrelated.

CULTURES OF SILENCE

Because the threat of violence if one reports paramilitaries to the police is so strong, women are scared into silence. As a result, direct figures on the ties between paramilitary membership and sexual assault and domestic abuse within communities are extremely limited. However, interviewees emphasized that the reports they hear from women suggest that the issue is pervasive.

Paramilitary violence reaches far beyond the sectarian divide and impacts diverse groups in both overt physical ways as well as in everyday life. Interviewees highlighted the need at all levels of society – government, politics, the voluntary sector, and the media – to reframe the dominant language around who violence happens to (men) and the limited ways that this violence is often defined (physical violence and acts of terrorism only).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy on Paramilitarism (and policy in general) Needs to Forefront Women and Girls

Multiple interviewees expressed that the actions of policymakers are checkbox when it comes to equality screening duties. For example, interviewees pointed to the abundance of women's empowerment programs that exist around building community resilience and tackling paramilitarism. These programs involve women in policies, in effect checking the equality box, without taking a robust look at the greater barriers to equality and gender violence that women face.

Increase the Use of Research from the Women's Sector

Interviewees suggested that research from the women's sector is an underutilised and underrecognized wealth of information on paramilitary illegal lending, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and coercive control. There is an opportunity to use this research more widely.

More Conversations Are Needed at the Top of Civic Society to End Silence Around Paramilitary Coercive Control.

There is a need for knowledge integration and conversation between the women's sector, statutory bodies, NGOs, politicians, policymakers, and academics. These conversations must be a priority at the top so that the burden of breaking the culture of silence doesn't fall disproportionately on women and girls.

INTRODUCTION

Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

When the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, one of the most celebrated and unprecedented conditions was the statutory equality duty. This provision is spelt out in the Rights, Safeguards, and Equality of Opportunity Section of the agreement and affirms "the right of equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity" (Secretary of State for NI, 1998, p.20). Despite global recognition of this legally binding commitment to human rights and aspiration for "a new era of gender relations," feminist scholars and activists alike draw attention to the failed promises of the Good Friday Agreement. They observe that "20 years on Northern Irish society exhibits all the trademarks and insidious characteristics of a patriarchal society that has yet to undergo a genuine transformation in gender relations" (Gilmartin, 2019, pg.102). Codirector of the Centre for Gender in Politics at Queen's University Belfast, Dr Maria Adriana-Deiana, points out that because public and scholarly understandings of political violence during The Troubles and peace-building efforts following 1998 have focused on men, there exists a "deep-seated reluctance to acknowledge that women and gender matter greatly in the politics of conflict and peace-making" (Adriana-Deiana, 2018).

This tendency is particularly evident when it comes to the study of paramilitary violence. In January of 2022, the Northern Irish Executive Office issued a Call for Views for its *Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls* noting the "need for a new strategic, whole of government approach to tackle violence against Women and Girls meaningfully." Paramilitary groups remain central to community identity in Northern Ireland and often "act as community organizations…leading to the silencing of women's voices within the local community and reinforcing gender divisions" (Women's Policy Group NI, 2020, p.66). However, the Executive Office call for views paper mentions paramilitarism only once, and does not mention any connection between paramilitary violence and gender-based violence (The Executive Office, 2022).

It is out of this gap in policy knowledge and nuanced political understanding of the gendered dynamics of paramilitarism that this research project was born. Efforts to understand and address coercive control by paramilitary groups (loan sharking, psychological intimidation and abuse, threat of violence) disproportionately focus on young men in Northern Ireland. Feminist groups like the Women's Policy Group draw attention to gaping societal gender disparities and historic rates of violence against women that do not garner the same attention and financial resources (2020). This study, in collaboration with the Communities in Transition (CIT) project at Cooperation Ireland, aims to explore the gap in research and knowledge around the gendered dynamics of paramilitary intimidation and control.

METHODOLOGY

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2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Question(s): How is the study of coercive control by paramilitary groups gendered? How do the covert manifestations of coercive control impact female-bodied communities in Northern Ireland? How can knowledge of the gendered expressions of exploitation by paramilitary groups inform the work and research done by the Communities in Transition project?

My research begins with a literature review, exploring definitions of coercive control and its expression in women's daily lives. I then pivot to an exploration of research on gender-based violence in Northern Ireland. Finally, I assess the (limited) literature that exits studying how violence by paramilitary groups impacts women.

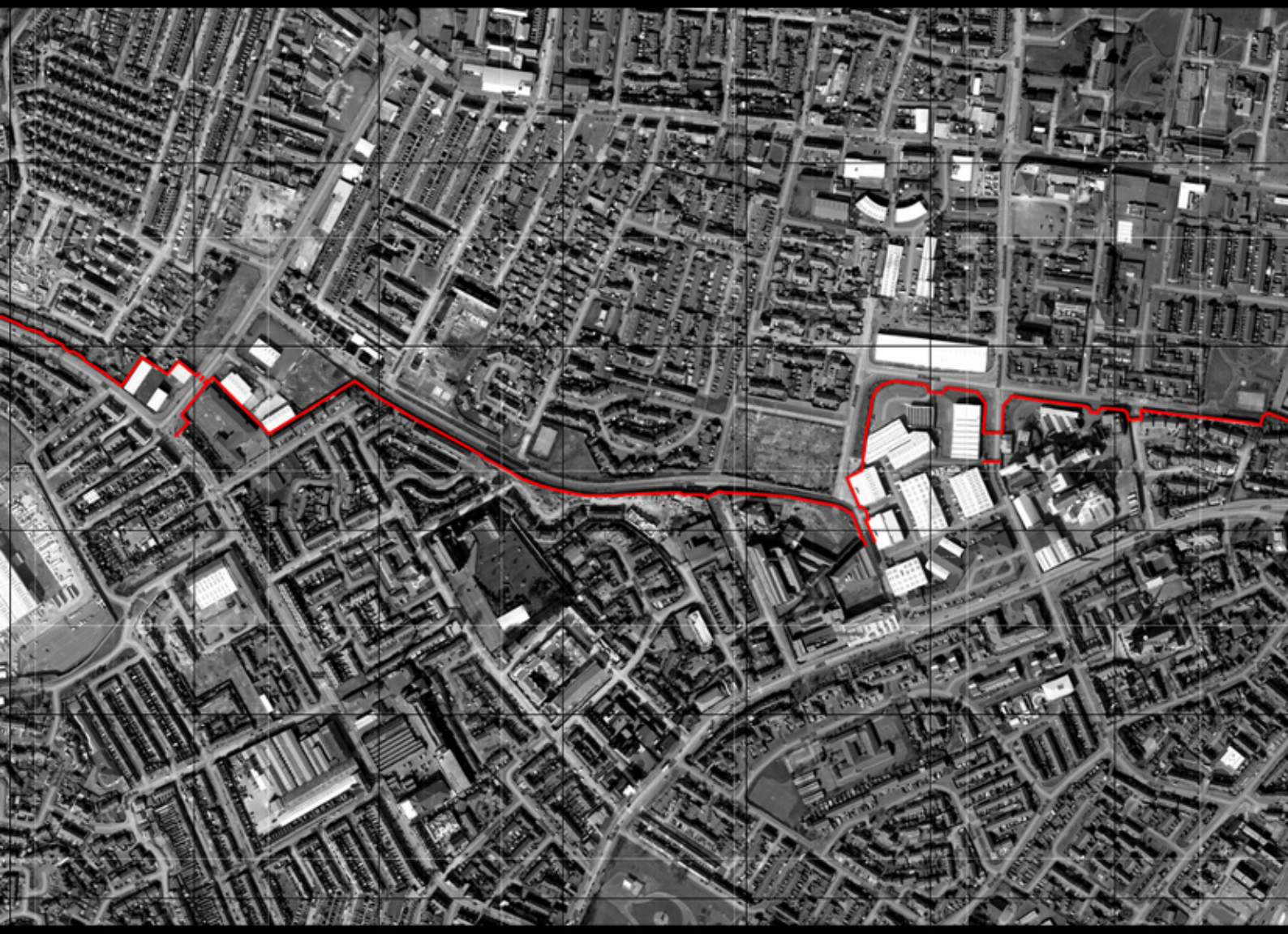
My primary research includes interviews with experts from Queen's University and Ulster University, leaders in the women's sector, and statutory sector to better understand the covert dynamics of coercive control and its daily impact on the lives of women in areas where paramilitarism is most prevalent.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

- The research draws from 10 semi-structured interviews. Includes both pre-determined questions and questions that flow from the answers given by each participant.
- Interviews are recorded and transcribed. The identities of participants will remain anonymous.
- Participants include five academic experts, four representatives from the women's sector, and one statutory body representative.

I draw from critical feminist methodologies by paying attention to the covert ways that economic and psychological control inflicts violence on the *everyday* lives of women (Anumol, 2022). Studies of gender-based violence overwhelmingly focus on sexual and domestic assault. While this research is certainly necessary and lacking in Northern Ireland, my project aims to study the often overlooked expressions of violence against women that harm their freedom and agency, and consider how this knowledge might influence future public policy.

LITERATURE



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REVIEW

3.1 Exploring Definitions and Impacts of 'Coercive Control'

The term 'coercive control' was originally coined and used by academics researching intimate partner violence who were searching for a way to describe the covert, overt, and overlapping control tactics abusive partners use to intimidate their partners into submission (Lagdon et al., 2022, p. 1). Coercive control has been defined by academics as "a pattern of negative behaviours which aim to intimidate, threaten and humiliate a person or restrict a person's liberty" (Lagdon et al., 2022, p. 2). Common among all definitions (both academic and legal) of coercive control is the radical idea that abuse is defined by more than just physical violence and should be extended to often neglected forms of control.

In practice, coercion and control encompass "psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse" (Stark, 2018, p. 83-84). Coercive control can look like sexual and physical violence, but it also includes economic abuse, psychological manipulation, and isolation from family and friends.

The Northern Irish Assembly moved in 2019 to criminalize coercive and controlling behaviour in their *Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings* Act (2021). The legislation brings Northern Ireland in line with the United Kingdom and Ireland and with human rights standards that argue that criminalizing only physical assault is not sufficient to address gender-based violence (McQuigg, 2021, p.1). Despite this progress being hailed as a "life-changer" for abuse survivors, academic research and policing efforts have lagged far behind the law (Breen, 2019). Issues with addressing coercive control have already arisen, including "difficulties in relation to prosecuting the offence" as well as a lack of resources in the PSNI to deal with the deluge of domestic violence assaults during the pandemic, much less also investigating reports of coercive and controlling behaviour (McQuigg, 2021, p.19). Though sexual and physical violence is pervasive in Northern Ireland (McQuigg, 2021 p.2), coercive control reaches far beyond physical abuse and impacts the daily lives of many more women throughout Northern Ireland.

3.2 Perspectives on Gender Equality in NI

In his 2019 article 'Gendering the 'Post- Conflict' Narrative in Northern Ireland's Peace Process' Dr Niall Gilmartin observes that:

> Conventional approaches to conflict seek to separate various forms of conflict into hermetically sealed categories. Invariably, physical political violence is treated as an anomalous event, with relatively clear start and endpoints (2019, p.90).

The narrative that violence in Northern Ireland is a relic of the past leads policymakers, police officers, community leaders, and researchers to ignore that "evidence from the so-called post-conflict period around the world demonstrates a continuity of violence for women, with many also facing new forms of violent practices" (Gilmartin, 2019, p.90). When it comes to both expressions of overt physical violence against women, as well as often more covert psychological manipulation, academics reveal that the legacy of conflict remains very real for underrepresented groups across Northern Ireland and other 'post-conflict' societies (Swaine, 2018, p.172). Researchers that study conflict assert that gender-based violence exists "because it is allowed, not because it is natural" and the norms that are permissive of violence before a conflict will perpetuate violence after the conflict has ended (Swaine, 2018, p.156).

The overwhelming majority of research investigating violence against women in Northern Ireland focuses on physical violence including intimate partner abuse and sexual assault. Recent studies, including data from the PSNI, reveal an epidemic of intimate partner violence across Northern Ireland – an issue only exacerbated by the pandemic. The 2020 Women's Policy Group NI, *Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan*, acknowledges this crisis asserting that:

> Between July 2018 and June 2019, there were 16,575 domestic abuse crimes recorded in Northern Ireland - the highest since records began in 2004/05. The lockdown has exacerbated domestic violence ("DV") against women, with four deaths in Northern Ireland attributed to DV since the lockdown began (p.70).

In 2019, the PSNI reported that the police respond to a domestic abuse report, on average, every 17 minutes, and that domestic violence accounts for 20% of overall crime reported to the police (PSNI, 2022). Throughout Northern Ireland, gender-based violence including "rape, trafficking, [and] abuse in the home … appears to be growing rather than diminishing with the 'peace' (Cockburn, 2013, p.163). Though written in 2013, Cockburn's article rings true today considering that rates of domestic violence are at their highest level since 2004 (Women's Policy Group, 2020). The prevailing narrative that Northern Ireland is a 'post-war' society "belies the violent reality of women's daily lives" (Gilmartin, 2019, p. 96).

3.3 Paramilitarism and Coercive Control

However, when it comes to studying the connection between paramilitarism and gender-based violence in Northern Ireland, research remains limited. Most researchers and policymakers will mention that paramilitary violence contributes to domestic violence and sexual assault, but do not offer a nuanced analysis of what paramilitary coercive control looks like at the community level. For example, the Executive Office's *Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls* notes that addressing gender-based violence is "clearly related to efforts to stop violence against other groups of people…including paramilitary style violence" (2022, p.17). Academics and government policymakers will acknowledge the issues are linked, but don't articulate exactly how they are or what to do about it.

In June 2021, a team of academics from Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast published a study titled 'Gender, violence, and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence' (McAlister *et al.*, 2021). The article specifically focuses on the experiences of young women across Northern Ireland and notes that "the focus on violent acts and the perpetrator-victim framing of violence occludes an understanding of the wider impact of paramilitary violence" (McAlister *et al.*, 2021, p. 4). The authors emphasize how representations of paramilitary violence in the media and academic studies overwhelmingly focus on men and "unintentionally reproduce narrow understandings of violence that are then reflected in policy and practice" (McAlister *et al.*, 2021, p.4). Among the article's most insightful findings, is the observation that paramilitary coercive control goes much beyond physical control to include "intimidation, curfews, fines, [and] exiling" in addition to "beatings and shootings" (McAlister *et al.*, 2021, p.3).

This research is in line with a report by Women's Support Network that found that loan sharking by paramilitary groups disproportionally impacts low-income communities, particularly vulnerable women (Women's Policy Group NI, 2020, p.67). They found that debt bondage, or loan-sharking activity, is at the core of most paramilitary coercive control against women (Women's Policy Group NI, 2020).

A study by the Financial Conduct Authority reports that 61% of illegal lending borrowers are female (Harding, 2020, p.24). PSNI data suggests that illegal lending is at the centre of paramilitary activity in communities across Northern Ireland, but it is rarely reported to the police, and therefore difficult to ascertain the true extent of the issue (Harding, 2020, p.16).

The articles I could find on paramilitary control highlight how "age, gender and culture combine to silence young women's experiences of paramilitary violence, impacting public knowledge, political discourse and service responses" (McAlister et al., 2021, p.5). Most government research surrounding domestic violence and sexual abuse in Northern Ireland will acknowledge that there is a link between cultures of hypermasculinity – like paramilitarism – and gender-based violence, but does not study that link specifically, and especially does not explore more covert, yet equally prevalent, forms of violence like psychological coercion.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CREDIT: Frankie Quinn for *The Irish Times*

This section outlines the findings from my interviews. The interviews explore the connection between paramilitarism and coercive control, and seek to explain why, despite wide academic and activist research on gender-based violence and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, the link between coercive control and paramilitarism remains underexplored. My interviews take a broad look at gender inequality in Northern Ireland, its relation to coercive control, and reference support systems already in place as well as how these might be further developed in Northern Ireland.

4.1 Debt Bondage

My interviewees stressed that illegal lending is the primary way that paramilitaries gain control over women within a community. Participants explained that paramilitary lending is at its core, a poverty and austerity issue:

> “So these are all obviously women in disadvantaged areas. So they’re generally either on Social Security benefits, or they're in very low-paid work. Borrowing is basically a feature of all of their lives because it's impossible to make ends meet on what they get on benefits or low-paid work that women are forced into, which is often part-time, because of their caring responsibilities (Voluntary Sector Participant #2, 2022).”

Interviewees highlighted the desperation of women in these communities – they need immediate help affording essentials like food, rent, or clothing – and paramilitary lending is often the easiest way to get money quickly. Other legal lending options are often closed off to these women because they don’t have good credit or stable incomes and so illegal lending, often from paramilitaries, becomes the only option. Interviewees also stressed that paramilitary lenders have deep ties within the community, know who is most vulnerable, and know who they can prey on.

After two years of a global pandemic, partnered now by rising inflation, people across Northern Ireland are struggling financially. That financial stress is only magnified for more marginalized members of society including single parents, most often women, and ethnic minorities. My interviewees were adamant that paramilitary lending, and by extension paramilitary control, is only going to get worse if the government does not act quickly to provide relief.

4.2 Threat of Physical & Sexual Violence

Interviewees spoke to both the real and perceived threat of violence that women face if they do not repay paramilitary loans. Voluntary sector representatives said that women reported verbal threats of physical violence from paramilitaries or heard rumours that paramilitaries would kneecap them or force them from their homes if they failed to pay. In some cases, interviewees said that when women could not repay their loans they were able 'pay' in other ways including prostitution or smuggling drugs. Whether rumours or verbal threats, women who accept these loans understand that violence is a potential consequence if she fails to repay a paramilitary loan. But many women live with this fear because paramilitary loans are convenient – lenders come right to your door, they are members of the community, and the money isn't tied up in onerous red tape.

Both academic and voluntary sector representatives reported that paramilitary membership is intimately tied to sexual abuse and domestic abuse in urban communities across Northern Ireland:

> "It's considered bad enough within your community to tout, but also then [there is] this double standard or this layering of shame if it's connected to sexual abuse. [For] any woman to come forward and to claim sexual assault or sexual abuse is difficult, but the level of mistrust or disbelief or the pressures around reporting paramilitaries within your areas [is] a really sensitive difficult thing to report (Academic Participant #2, 2022)."

Because the threat of violence if one reports paramilitaries to the police is so strong, women are scared into silence. As a result, direct data on the ties between paramilitary membership and sexual assault and domestic abuse within communities is extremely limited. However, interviewees were adamant that the reports they've heard from women suggest that the issue is pervasive.

4.3 Paramilitary Surveillance

Both the real and perceived threat of violence creates a culture of paramilitary surveillance. Participants noted that this is a form of coercive control that often goes unrecognized:

> [We saw] controlling elements of what [women] can do, where they can go, and the threat of violence is as real and as pervasive as actually being physically attacked. [There's] this notion of you're being watched, the people are kind of keeping an eye on who you're talking to you or what you're doing. And by the threat of somebody within your community or somebody reporting something that you've done. To be living under that kind of surveillance, or to be under that kind of threat, is immense (Academic Participant #2, 2022).

Interviewees stressed that paramilitary members wield immense power within communities. Multiple interviewees mentioned that they have heard of UVF, UDA, and RHC members who hold leadership positions in peacebuilding organizations and community groups.

Especially in tight-knit Unionist and Nationalist communities, paramilitary surveillance can be both direct and indirect. My interviewees said that the surveillance culture is upheld by both community members who talk about the violence that paramilitaries enact, as well as direct threats of violence by paramilitary members:

> [It's like] 'there's something in the air,' there's that feeling of suspicion. I mean this notion of paramilitary talk, it's almost talked about as if it's normal, who you've heard being threatened, and young women know it and they hear it and they listen. They're very clear in terms of places they know to go and not to go, who's involved and who isn't involved. All of that creates a real sense of unease and instability for young women that again, we just don't recognize (Academic Participant #1, 2022).

Interviewees suggested that the fear and anxiety that paramilitary control creates restrict women's lives. Though paramilitaries control women through loan sharking, drug trafficking, and sexual violence, they also create a culture of control and silence throughout their communities. This culture benefits paramilitary members by insulating them from law enforcement.

4.4 Minority Perspectives

Paramilitary coercive control is also deeply tied to homophobia and racism across Northern Ireland, with ethnic minority women disproportionately impacted. Interviewees emphasized that it is simply not enough to talk about divisions between 'orange' and 'green' when the fear of the 'other' or 'outsider' has increasingly gendered, racialized, heteronormative, and sectarian implications.

> "One thing that I really believe needs to be explored in all of this is the control and gatekeeping by paramilitaries against ethnic minorities, particularly ethnic minority women, I think that's a really unique form of violence that needs to be examined. Look at the different abuse that Muslim women are facing, and the different issues that they're facing in their communities where they're not allowed into different areas or being made to feel unsafe (Voluntary Sector Participant #1, 2022)."

In multiple interviews, academics and members of the voluntary sector mentioned that paramilitary gatekeeping and control is a huge problem when refugees, asylum seekers, and ethnic minority groups move into Unionist or Nationalist controlled areas. Often, ethnic minority and LGBT groups face physical and verbal threats that force them to live in fear, or, move from the community.

4.5 Cultures of Silence

Paramilitary surveillance in communities leads to an overarching culture of silence around paramilitary coercive control.

Academic and voluntary sector representatives described a double silencing. Women are simultaneously surrounded by covert and underrecognized forms of coercive control that become normalized and, at the same time, shamed or threatened into silence by paramilitary groups in their area. There is equally a sense that the violence or trauma that women experience is less legitimate than the harms that men face in contemporary paramilitaries and faced during The Troubles.

> The experiences of men...have been so much at the forefront, that it's created this almost reduction in [young women's] own experiences. So it would almost feel wrong to prioritize your experience...when a person that you saw was physically beaten to a pulp. If you only talk about things in particular ways, then you only see them in particular ways. And then it delegitimizes your own experiences (Academic Participant #1, 2022).

This double silencing makes it extremely difficult to understand the true scope of issues like paramilitary sexual violence and loan sharking. My interviewees in the voluntary sector stressed that getting women in local communities to open up about coercive control takes an investment of time and trust, something that cannot be accomplished in a short consultation period or as part of a short-term project. However, conversations at the local level are essential to understanding the nature of paramilitary coercive control and its gendered impact.

4.6 Reframing Paramilitary Violence

Interviewees across the academic and voluntary sectors said that it is critically important that Northern Ireland find new ways of conceptualizing and talking about paramilitary violence. Historically, peace in Northern Ireland is conceived as a significant reduction in sectarian violence.

In reality, paramilitary violence reaches far beyond the sectarian divide and impacts diverse groups in both overt physical ways as well as in everyday life. Interviewees highlight the need at all levels of society – government, politics, voluntary, and the media – to reframe the dominant language around who violence happens to (men) and the limited ways that this violence is often defined (physical violence and acts of terrorism only). Paramilitary violence and coercive control are not clear cut, they never have been. But during a time when Northern Ireland is in a state of flux – a pandemic, new migrant populations, Brexit, and an upcoming election – new ways of imagining a peaceful society that transcend the sectarian divide must be considered.

Practically, my interviewees suggested that violence against marginalized groups outside of the Catholic/Protestant divide needs to be recognised, and that more covert forms of violence that influence the everyday lives of these marginalized groups must be identified in policy, law, and media.

It is critically important that policymakers avoid reproducing hierarchies of harm. Multiple academics pointed out that the women they interview tend to minimize the paramilitary harm they've experienced because they believe that the men have it much worse. Historically this has always been the dominant narrative. Interviewees suggested that this narrative is reflected in funding streams that direct more money to programs that address male paramilitary activity and recruitment but fail to take into account the harms that women and other minority groups experience. If we want women to value their own experiences, and their own voices, paramilitary harm must be understood as having a broad impact not just on young men, but on women, families, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ individuals.

CREDIT: Olivia Blankenbiller

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the interviews, I asked each individual about the single policy recommendation they would make to provide more support to women experiencing paramilitary coercive control. The following priorities are the product of those collective suggestions.

Policy on Paramilitarism (and policy in general) Needs to Forefront Women and Girls

Multiple interviewees expressed that the actions of policymakers are checkbox when it comes to equality screening duties. For example, interviewees pointed out the abundance of women's empowerment programmes that exist around building community resilience and tackling paramilitarism. These programmes involve women in policies, in effect checking the equality box, without taking a robust look at the greater barriers to equality and gender violence that women face:

> "No amount of empowerment is going to change [whether] you're being threatened by paramilitaries, or if you've had to get a loan off a paramilitary group and you're at risk now, or if your children are caught up in drug dealing (Voluntary Sector Participant #1, 2022)."

My research revealed that it is critical for policymakers to make women and girls a priority, and to consider how paramilitarism directly impacts diverse groups including women, LGBTQ individuals, and ethnic minorities. Critical to this are long-term funding contracts. Interviewees said that programmes and organizations in the women's sector receive one-year funding contracts, which means that groups end up spending more time applying for funding than using it and supporting local women. The commitment to ending violence against women and girls must be concerted and long-term.

Increase Use of Research From the Women's Sector

Women's sector groups submit policy recommendations for most government consultations. Interviewees emphasized that this research is an underutilised and underrecognised wealth of information on paramilitary illegal lending, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and coercive control. This research could be more widely utilised.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

More Formal Research is Needed On Paramilitary Coercive Control

Though the women's sector has worked hard to incorporate research on paramilitary coercive control into reports around pandemic recovery, sectarianism, and violence against women and girls, there is still a lack of concrete data investigating the pervasiveness of paramilitary coercive control. Interviews and anecdotal evidence are extremely valuable, but more concrete data and figures are also needed to understand how deeply rooted issues like debt bondage, sexual assault, and domestic violence by paramilitaries are in local communities.

More Conversations Are Needed at the Top of Civic Society to End Silence Around Paramilitary Coercive Control.

There is a need for knowledge integration and conversation between the women's sector, statutory bodies, NGOs, politicians, policymakers, and academics. To end the stigma, silence, and shame that women in local communities face when they talk about paramilitary coercive control, policymakers must be comfortable acknowledging paramilitarism's disparate impact on women and girls. Those at the top must signal that addressing paramilitary coercive control is a priority so that the women who are most impacted feel that they are not alone, and that coercive control is not normal or acceptable. These conversations must be a priority so that the burden of breaking the culture of silence doesn't fall disproportionately on women and girls.

Paramilitary Harm Should Be Reimagined

Paramilitarism is not only an orange versus green issue, but is deeply interconnected to gender inequality, racism, homophobia, and poverty. Understanding the forces that strengthen paramilitary membership including sectarianism, hypermasculinity, racism, homophobia, poverty, mental health issues, and lack of opportunity is therefore important. Historically, tackling paramilitarism has disproportionately focused on men, specifically young men, but the reality is that paramilitary harm has a far greater reach. This requires a reimagining of the ways that we conceptualize paramilitarism and the language we use to understand it.

5.2 Concluding statement

Peacebuilding efforts on this island prove that the identities that divide us can also be bridged. Though this report focuses on the heavy topic of violence against women and girls in all its forms, it should be a source of optimism instead of disillusionment. The past can trap and limit the way that we understand ourselves and our world. Or, it can inspire us to see that as Northern Ireland moves forward in the peace process, new issues and new obstacles to change will emerge. Progress, in itself, challenges us to reimagine our world over and over again.

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