DEALING WITH THE PAST IN IRELAND: WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Women’s experience of conflict and need for implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
Contents

Executive Summary 3
Conclusions 5
Urban Group 6
Rural Group 15
Acknowledgements 22

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The project was participatory, involving women in a range of programmes designed to support women to identify the harms they had suffered, and the mechanisms that support recovery from harm.

In parallel with this project these three years have also seen intense debate and political negotiation on how Ireland and Britain “deal with the past” and develop transitional justice and other mechanisms to support societal recovery from conflict related violations.

The issue of gender and a gender specific approach to dealing with the past has not translated into the mechanisms now agreed in the Stormont House Agreement. This is despite international legal obligations to ensure the participation of women and a gender focused approach to recovery and rehabilitation.

This report is an argument for a proactive policy response to gender specific conflict harms and a contribution to the overall debate on dealing with the past.

**International Legal Obligations**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) gives international recognition to the experience of women in conflict. It recognizes that women experience conflict differently and as a result have specific needs post-conflict. More, the resolution requires states to develop a gender sensitive approach to conflict resolution and take active steps to ensure women’s participation in post conflict structures.


These complementary developments for women in conflict and post conflict zones have not however impacted on the day-to-day lives of women bereaved and injured by the conflict on and between our islands.

In 2012 the British Government produced their National Action Plan on the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The North of Ireland is not mentioned as they have refused to acknowledge that there was a conflict here. As a result they have no obligations. This is despite the British government being a co-guarantor of the 1998 Peace Agreement.

In 2014 the Irish Government launched a consultation on their 2nd Action Plan for UNSCR 1325. Women in Relatives for Justice were encouraged to make submissions to the consultation. RFJ made a substantial submission and took part in organized workshops. In January 2015 the Irish Government produced their Action Plan. This plan makes tangible commitment to women affected by conflict living on the island of Ireland. This is a significant and welcome step forward for the other co-guarantor of the Peace Agreement.

**Report Background and Content**

During the course of the project women took part in a range of participatory activities. These included art therapy sessions, creative writing programmes, photographic projects and specific residential workshops on UNSCR1325.

The findings of this report draw on the learning from all of these activities.

The two in-depth reports that follow document the residential workshops involving women from urban and rural backgrounds, all directly bereaved by conflict. These reports demonstrate the value and necessity of participatory, development-based process with women. All of the women who took part have also participated in other development based programmes within RFJ. Safety, respect and non-judgment were essential baselines for these workshops.

The two reports demonstrate that similar issues were raised by the women - although they do differ in some practical aspects.

**Dealing with the Past**

The demonstrated needs, as outlined by the women bereaved by conflict participating in this programme,
expose a glaring gap in the processes to deal with our past.1

This is not a new argument. There has been a growing voice across the community making the case for a gendered framework to be applied to the structures for dealing with our past. This has been essentially ignored.

When taken with the parallel international legal obligations to ensure that women’s experiences and needs are addressed in processes and indeed that women’s participation in post conflict processes is ensured, then this blind siding and sidelining of women is inexcusable.

These are not sectional interests. They go to the heart of the matters of truth, justice and accountability. Crucially they also demonstrate that the matters of recovery, rehabilitation and reparation are not separate. They co-exist and are connected in the lived lives of these women and their families.

It is clear that the statutory approach of supporting the psychological effects of trauma as separate to the outstanding matters of truth and justice has failed these women as they have not experienced these as separate needs. Holistic interconnected support is a clearly demonstrated requirement.

The women involved affirmed that that they are still experiencing a range of emotions and ongoing needs. They experience those feelings as women, and therefore, it is essential that the processes of addressing them be contextualized within a gendered framework.

When policymakers and politicians fail to understand these women’s determination, energy, knowledge, and skills, they cripple any efforts to truly alter the day-to-day lives of women living in a post-conflict state. The experience of women engaged in the agony of truth recovery is no better summed up than in the quote from one participant who talked about “the struggle between wanting a normal life and living a life in quest of truth and justice”.

For those who try to project an agenda on those families engaging the courts or other mechanisms there is much understanding to be gained from listening to the women who speak about being “trapped in a mourning process” and “forced to carry the burden of campaigning”. This is not a life chosen. But it is a life that is lived through requirement.

An argument for a change of approach: A Contribution to Dealing with the Past

Apart from merely saying current approaches have not worked effectively, or that it is an international legal obligation to change approach, there is a clear message from the women in this report.

In the debate on dealing with the past by not have a gendered lens to our approach we are missing the harms that women experienced.

In a process that has been to a large degree been framed by Article 2 the Right to Life, we miss other harms unless we actively apply such a lens. We miss harms such as those suffered by women when family homes were attacked. We miss economic and social harms caused in the aftermath of violent bereavement. We miss the harm of the impact of the denial of truth and perpetual impunity. We miss the harms endured in the private sphere, such as sexual violence in a conflict context. We miss the harm of mothers who lost children. We miss the harm of losing a female relative.

Without safety and a gender specific approach we cannot hope to identify these experiences or support recovery from those experiences. This is a critical gap in our debate on dealing with the past and the development of human rights compliant structures.

UNSCR 1325 can make a difference. It is, or should be, a muscular tool for creating legitimate spaces for women to actively participate in all stages of the post-conflict process.

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Conclusions

1. For the women who participated in this project the conflict is not over. It continues with the need to pursue truth, justice and recovery.

2. There is a need to appreciate and include different forms of expression of trauma and experience of conflict. This includes silence and wordlessness.

3. For women who participated in the project their role in family is integral to understanding their experience of conflict and is therefore tied to the complex needs of recovery. This is not to reduce or essentialise women in their family roles but rather to appreciate the lived connection and lives of these women.

4. Processes of recovery and reparation are integrally tied to processes of truth and justice. Public policy that separates or denies this lived connection fails to meet these integrated needs.

5. UNSCR 1325 offers real and meaningful potential for these women bereaved by conflict. They connected with its promise and engaged meaningfully with its intention.

6. The Irish UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan offers a genuine step forward in recognition of the experience of women affected by conflict on the island of Ireland. Implementation requires active participation and inclusion of women bereaved and injured by conflict.

7. The British Government must include women affected by conflict between our islands in their national action plan.

8. The Stormont House Agreement is currently blind to gender harms and applying a gender lens to its mechanisms. There is however a real opportunity to develop gender appropriate frameworks within the mechanisms on dealing with the past in the Stormont House Agreement.
Urban Group

In the North of Ireland, the violence that is associated with the conflict is not usually perceived as violence against women, but as violence against a group or community (e.g., republicans, nationalists, loyalists, unionists, Catholics, Protestants) or a geographical location (Belfast, Portadown, Armagh). Thus, the response to conflict-related violence is usually a response by and to various constituencies that do not adequately differentiate the ways in which males and females experience said violence.

The women’s engagement in the weekend workshop was one way for them to acknowledge and reflect upon the types of violence they, and other women, have experienced over the years and in that process reflect on strategies for reweaving some of the social, familial, and community connections that conflict destroyed.

Methodology

The women engaged in 4 formal group sessions where they participated in large and small group activities and shared individual stories about their lives. They also spent a good deal of time informally discussing their lives, pre- and post-Good Friday Agreement.

The use of creative activities, in this case, painting and symbolizing, to construct knowledge and explore aspects of one’s life were powerful tools for uncovering, discovering, and valuing the women’s experiences, their memories of past events, and the knowledge they have gained and constructed out of pivotal life experiences. Accompanying those activities were long, informative, challenging, and sometimes disturbing discussions that were essential in providing the women with occasions to see that their feelings, beliefs, experiences, and concerns were heard and taken seriously by the group.

This was particularly important given that the women came from different nationalist and/or republican communities and prior to the workshop, had never heard one another’s stories. The opportunity to encounter one another through sharing life experiences showed the women that one, their stories were powerfully similar, and two, that, as women, they were not alone in their suffering, trauma, grief, and resilience.

The women responded to the activities with humor, willingness, and a desire to give testimony to their lives in a vocal and visible way. By being provided with uninterrupted periods of time, the women reflected upon and discussed their lives as women living in communities of conflict and, at present, an evolving, shaky peace. In so doing, they gained a clearer sense of their individual and collective histories and how those histories intersect with one another.

Engaging in a collaborative process of reflection can be anxiety-producing for people who are unaccustomed to speaking freely, expressing themselves through multiple modalities, and voicing their fears, hurts, and resentments within a sociopolitical context of unrest and instability.

Yet as the reflective process continued, the women developed more confidence in themselves, which then increased their desire to pose questions and share experiences that, heretofore, had remained “locked away behind closed doors”.

Three major themes were generated by the women - ones that are directly linked to key aspects of UNSCR 1325:

1. The importance of viewing conflict through the lens of gender;


3 ibid
2. The contribution of women’s narratives and life experiences in better understanding the consequences of conflict on women, children, and families,

3. The necessity for including women in the development and implementation of strategies for those living with the traumatic effects of war and violence.

**Viewing Conflict through the Lens of Gender**

“[O]ne cannot understand either women’s relation to war or war itself without understanding gender, and understanding the ways that war and gender are, in fact, mutually constitutive”

Women who have lived their lives in the context of conflict develop a sense of impending doom about what might happen to them, their families, and in particular, their children. This heightened anticipation is intimately linked to what Martín-Baró calls “normal abnormality”

- a state of being/living where people come to anticipate living with multiple forms of sanctioned and unsanctioned violence, marginalization, and oppression, all of which inform and shape their daily lives. The women participating in the workshop have spent decades living with a sixth sense that they, their families, and for some, their children, are never quite safe in their homes and communities. As was evident during the discussions, that sentiment remains strong. One woman stated that she “can see the Troubles happening again. If we don’t get a United Ireland in my time, I can actually see it. I think history can repeat itself in a way that we go back to the conflict again.”

Others concurred. Some women described how, even with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, they continue to live within a context of anticipatory and actual violence. For example, in 2002, months of rioting, attacks on homes, and gunfights led to what is referred to as the “Siege of the Short Strand.”

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“It [the violence] should have been nipped in the bud on May 12, 2002, but it kept on, and to me, in my lifetime going through the Troubles, 2002 was more horrific because what happened was at our front doors and the Troubles were widespread. We couldn’t go to the doctor’s or the dentist or the chemist. We actually had to have a doctor come into the community center. I mean would you believe that would happen in today’s society.

“It’s a terrible thing to say but you get used to it. My house, I live as if I’m in jail. I have steel on my back door and all of my back windows. For us to put a garbage bag in to my bin, I have to open my back door and I have a big grill and that’s what you had in the 70s and the 80s for security reasons. Still got them . . .. That’s the peace process we live in.”

Although the daily, incessant forms of violence that characterized the conflict have abated in many areas of the North of Ireland, as noted above, there are still attacks on communities and individuals and those attacks are not experienced as isolated events, but as directly linked to the conflict. How they are linked is an important question to explore if the people of the North of Ireland are to be free of violence and conflict. Yet the question of linkages between the past and the present is rarely posed by or to women. As De Alwis, Merus, & Sajjad (2013) suggests, “Peace processes, like all other social processes, are deeply gendered and often reiterate gendered and other power hierarchies and inequalities”. Therefore, if local women’s voices and experiences continue to be ignored, many women will continue to experience feelings of vulnerability and remain skeptical of the current political system. The women clearly demonstrated that they are still experiencing a range of emotions related to the decades-long conflict: degradation, powerlessness, resentment, anger, disappointment, pessimism, anxiety, and rage. They experience those feelings as women, and therefore, it is essential that the processes of addressing them be contextualized within a gendered framework.

One of the activities the women engaged in during the workshop generated a thought-provoking discussion among the group. The women were gave large pieces of chart paper and then invited to reflect on how they think people outside of Ireland perceive Irish women. In addition, the women were asked to record how they themselves perceive Irish women. Once they completed that aspect of the activity, the women were invited to design a symbol that reflected their image of what best represents an Irish woman. Once completed, the women presented their lists and symbols to the larger group. The remainder of the participants were then invited to ask questions and/or offer comments about each group’s presentation. The resulting dialogue led to spontaneous and lively storytelling, moments of introspection and humor, as well as moments of discomfort and self-consciousness.

The women believe that many outsiders, as well as politicians and policymakers, view Irish women as “submissive to men, uneducated, boozers, fighters, living in slums, and easily manipulated.” They also believe that the media has presented them in a “bad light, like we are small-minded and can’t move on. When that happens, people don’t understand why we still have issues that stem from the conflict.”

Although the women identified with some of the perceived ideas of how others view Irish women, their own perceptions of themselves were far less monolithic. Instead, the women’s perceptions of themselves revealed a more nuanced identity of women living in the North of Ireland. Unlike how they believe others perceive them, the women overwhelmingly supported the image of themselves as “brave, multitaskers, fighters, brilliant mothers, loving, able to express views, care about our communities, and neighbourly.”

How they live out their multiple identities and roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, educators, employees, activists, protestors, and community workers reveals the multiple and contradictory forces that shape their beliefs and actions. It also highlights the extent to
which generational trauma threads itself through their lives and the lives of their families. For example, the mothers of these women suffered tremendously due to the loss of their husbands and/or sons during the conflict. As stated by some of the women:

“Mummy was never the same after [my brother’s murder]. She was a different person and at that age 14, you needed your mommy. You want to come home from school and tell her wee things and she wasn’t listening. She was definitely a different person.”

“The murder of my daddy . . . And me and my family, 6 kids, we were in tatters . . . Then to be quite honest, my mummy just left this world. She just completely and totally left this world. She took medication. She self-medicated.”

“My mummy never went to bed. She’d sit until 3 or 4 in the morning. She thought maybe [my brother] would walk in the door all those years later even though his body was in pieces from the bomb and he was long dead. Still lived liked that all those years later and she always thought he would come back.”

Like their mothers, this generation of women also suffered the physical loss of grandfathers, husbands, fathers, brothers, and uncles. And like their mothers before them, they continue to experience emotional and psychological suffering that manifests itself in grief, anger, sadness, guilt, and a deep-seated desire to understand why their loved one was killed on that particular day, at that particular time, and for what reason? And by whom? “And will we ever get answers to these questions?”

Currently many of the women are mothers and/or grandmothers themselves and are dealing with their individual grief, their collective grief as members of their own birth families, and in the present, as mothers/grandmothers who are horrified at the thought that their children and/or grandchildren might live through what they lived through.

“I would love my children and grandchildren not to come through what my family went through. Peace with respect from all sides. And peace from our own communities and with our own as well.”

“As mothers, most of us are grannies now, we don’t want our kids growing up the way we did . . . And we teach our kids not to hate and not to be bitter. Take things as they come and deal with things every day. We just want the best for our children. And women need to be consulted about how to do that. Politicians are shaking hands, agreeing to this, agreeing to that. Who cares about us? Who cares?”

“My 6 year old granddaughter - I try to put the fight into her. I want her to grow up and if I don’t get justice, then I want her to fight for it, not physical fight. I want her to carry on the fight for justice for everybody because I can’t see it happening while I am alive.”

The women who participated in the weekend have attended school, married, divorced, and brought children into the world. They care for aging parents and young grandchildren, work outside the home, engage in community work, and are committed to staying on a path that leads to healing, justice, and “getting answers to the questions that have plagued us for so long.” When policymakers and politicians fail to understand their determination, energy, knowledge, and skills, they cripple any efforts to truly alter the day-to-day lives of women living in a post-conflict state. What ends up occurring is that women become categorized, and therefore treated, as victims or perpetrators. Yet these women do not see themselves that way. As one woman stated, “We’re still survivors because we’re still here talking about it. I will never ever be labeled as a victim. We chose the path of trying to deal with it every day.”

Cohn concurs when she argues:

“It is critical to beware of categorizing women as either victims or agents during the war; it is a false dichotomy
with deleterious effects. While of course it is true that wars visit exceedingly terrible experiences upon some women (i.e., they can be “victims”), it is equally true that those same women will draw upon the internal and external resources they have to deal with to try to improve their situations (i.e., they have “agency”) – it is not either/or.?”

Within the constraints of a gender-stratified society, many women, certainly the women who participated in the weekend, remain key actors in the struggle for truth, justice, freedom, and equality. It is past time that politicians and policymakers understand “both the challenges and opportunities that women confront, and the agency they have and constraints they face in responding to these.”

The Wisdom in/of Women’s Narratives

During the workshop, the women were provided with opportunities to undo the spinning of stories about their lives - stories that all too often serve to bolster the official record of events while dismissing the social history of everyday women.

Their discussions, and their creative expressions of war-related issues, provided opportunities for them to bring their speech to life through creative processes of self-reflection, self-disclosure, and collective knowledge construction.

As important, the stories the women narrated helped us to see some of the underlying themes that inform how they view the history of the conflict, their participation, or lack thereof, in the conflict, the crafting of the Good Friday Agreement and its consequences for people on all sides of the conflict, and the current state of families and communities in the present day. In particular, the women’s experiences, and the stories they told during the weekend, reveal the tensions that exist in their lives between letting go and hanging on, between living with a sense of loss and engaging their daily lives with a desire to see “justice done” – however that justice is achieved. The women were invited to reflect on a defining moment, or moments, that occurred during the conflict. Some of the women had never spoken publicly about events that occurred decades ago. One woman sat in silence and told us that she simply couldn’t talk about what happened to her and her loved ones during the conflict. Another woman said she would talk about the murder of one of her brothers but not the other. “Too painful. Can’t talk about that one”.

The moments that have defined the women’s lives revolve around the murders of their fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, and friends. What the text does not capture is the raw emotion that accompanied their narratives.

“The murder of my daddy… My daddy’s remains being brought up to the house was horrific… He wasn’t fixed properly. Actually, you could put your hand in the hole in his stomach and there were flies going up and down his nose and things like that and the lid had to be put on his coffin when he was taken away and it was horrific.”

“The day our daddy was murdered, that was the defining moment in my life. In my eyes, life as we know it ceased. I felt numb, unbelievable sadness… Couldn’t focus or do anything. Nobody to talk to… So many questions and no one giving you any answers. Time shifted and then you realized that life does go on and you have to find your way and do your best to quell the sadness. I still have questions and truth and justice is what we want at the end of the day.”

“My brother was 17 and his girlfriend was 17 and they were killed when a bomb went off. People were telling stories about seeing their fingers all over the streets.”

“I have 2 brothers that were killed in the Troubles… One was killed 40 years ago in 1972. We couldn’t see him in the coffin. It was closed and that was a very hard thing.”

“My brother was tortured by the police all his life. He was arrested for a bomb and got out 10 and a half years later. Less than a year later, he was killed in an explosion so he lost all his childhood. He died when he was 33. We never saw my brother in the coffin either.”

“When my brother was in jail, there were years when we didn’t see him because he was on the blanket protest. The years he was on the protest my mummy lived her life wondering if he was OK because of the information coming out of the prison that he was badly beaten and his arm was broken and he was brutalized. He got out to go to my mother’s funeral but there was a lot of trouble. At his
funeral plastic bullets were fired and people were hurt. My
daddy was 70 years old and he was knocked to the ground.
My brothers were trying to stop him from hitting the
ground and keep the coffin from hitting the street."

“My husband was murdered as he was going into work.
He was 26 and I had a wee girl too. After that, I had a lot
of anger in me and I was trying to be the best mummy I
could be. She wasn’t having the same mummy apparently
because she spoke to someone then, ‘My mummy’s not
the same happy mummy anymore’. I had this festering
inside me. It was hurting me and I had this rage all the
time inside me.”

The defining moments the women shared happened in
the past. Yet speaking about those moments triggered
thoughts and emotions that generated tears, anger, silence,
compassion, and an overall sense that, though terribly
painful, it was refreshing to speak and listen to others and
realize that they were not alone in their suffering. As one
woman said, “It’s like picking a scab and reopening things
again. But it is good to talk about it.”

The women threaded the stories of their defining
moments with other events that have shaped their lives.
For example, some of the women were threatened: “I had
a gun put to my head”. “I was told not to go back to work,
same place where my husband was murdered. They
would do certain things to me if I went back”. Others
were attacked in their homes: “I come down my stairs
on my belly. Within seconds, smoke bombs, fire bombs,
everything. You couldn’t see a thing in front of your
hands”. Still others were imprisoned: “I was constantly
being taking to Castlereagh. Constantly being tortured
in Castlereagh. Other police stations a lot, too”.

It was by engaging in those difficult discussions that the
women began to feel that what they said mattered, maybe
not to people inside or outside the community, but to
the group itself. The women’s feelings, experiences, and
perspectives were listened to and validated. Yet that did
not mean they were in agreement about all of the issues
facing the people in the North, e.g., political structures,
the Good Friday Agreement, and justice for perpetrators,
issues that are fraught with questions of power, trust,
authority, separation, betrayal and loss. Like many
people in the North of Ireland, the women’s perspectives
vary about the strategies used to end the war, the
responsibilities of paramilitary groups pre- and post-
conflict, the motivations of politicians, and the types of
resources required and ways that resources should be
used throughout the country. These differences are to
be expected. They are necessary elements in processes
of change and need to be viewed, not as impediments
to whatever kind of post-war process occurs, but as
opportunities for constructing new knowledge and
developing new ways of addressing people’s everyday
experiences as they relate to the conflict. This is
particularly true for women who maintain and sustain
the social fabric of their families and communities and
yet are rarely provided with opportunities to sit at the
tables where those types of decisions are made.

Truth Recovery

Like other people in the North of Ireland who have lost
loved ones, the women also want to discover the truth
about who killed their family members and friends.
They realize that the truth will not change the reality
of the event, nor will it necessarily bring the fullness
of justice that they and others desire. Yet, what the
truth can do is provide people with a sense of clarity
about events that have taken place and, in some cases,
reveal the someone, something, or some group that was
responsible for the loss of a friend, the death of a family
member, and/or the other forms of suffering that came
about as the result of the conflict.

The contested issues mentioned above would most likely
never be effectively addressed if women were not at the
forefront of a process that examines the myriad issues
facing the North of Ireland in the present day. As was
clearly evident during the weekend, narratives by and
about Irish women are essential to understanding the
impact of conflict on women, and subsequently, for
developing tools for addressing the consequences of
the war. In addition, attending to women’s narratives
is essential if policy makers want to ensure the effective
implementation of UNSCR 1325. A key aspect of that
implementation is creating spaces for people to talk
about events that have informed every day of their lives
since before and during the conflict, something rarely
done within families and communities.
“He’s been dead 40 years, and nobody’s ever sat down and talked about it, as a family, we’ve never talked about it. My mummy, she’s been dead 6 years now, even she never would have sat down and talked about any of this.”

“If there is any work to be done for my daddy, I have to do it on my own. No one in my family wants to get involved. One sister can’t talk about it and the other ones didn’t really know him. They were young so they don’t have a memory of him. And if they do, they never talk about him. My family has never sat down and talked about my daddy. That actually hurts me.”

“The thing is, you normally don’t get a chance to express yourself. Even with your friends, you don’t talk about anything like that. People that aren’t in the same position, it’s hard for them to understand. It never touched them but when you’re in among us, it touched us, and it’s better to get it out.”

Resources, Strategies, and Implementation

Even though there are an increasing number of women participating in many of the political parties in the North of Ireland, there is a noticeable absence of women’s voices in the social and political structures that currently frame the Good Friday Agreement, as well as in the institutions that presently govern the North of Ireland. This is not surprising given the historical positionalities of women throughout Ireland, North and South. Like women in many other countries of the world, women living in the North of Ireland have been - and are - socially excluded, economically disadvantaged, and politically and institutionally marginalized.

Over the last 30 years, women with varied political affiliations across the North of Ireland have responded to that marginalization by participating in discussions and debates about violence, peace, equality, justice, and other issues related to the war outside the political structures of the Good Friday Agreement. Many women have redefined the meaning of politics – a challenging endeavor given that they must do so within the traditional framework of a male-defined politics where women have always been regarded as inadequate in the political arena\(^\text{10}\).

Instead of struggling to fit into a system that is antagonistic to them, many women engage in a type of politics that may not “automatically translate to electoral representation and decision-making\(^\text{11}\)” but does cohere with their goals and objectives as they relate to political agency. In addition, the uncertainty the women have about the current political process and the varied acts of violence that continue to be part of their lives, has disrupted the sense of ‘community’ they have lived with and under for many years. They, like many others, are now being faced with the possible disintegration of what they believed was an integrated individual and communal life that had, as one of its aspects, a commitment to the nationalist and republican cause. In its place, they are left questioning “the sureness of political discrimination . . . how it is [and will be] articulated and reconfigured\(^\text{12}\)” in the current climate of social and political unease.

As important, the women’s experiences suggest that the effects of long-term violence result in feelings of guilt, betrayal, mistrust, and cynicism between neighbors and friends. Sometimes, those feelings remain hidden. Other times, those feelings erupt and lead to more conflict and/or violence. Whether the disconnections that occur between neighbors and friends are spoken aloud, or whether they remain whispered on street corners, the women participating in the project believe that those relationships need to be addressed as well and resources need to be made available for communities that want them.

The women are the experts when it comes to addressing the resources needed to maintain and sustain the well being of women, families, and communities post-conflict. This was evident when they engaged in a group discussion that focused on the kinds of concrete

\(^{10}\) Supra n3

\(^{11}\) Porter, E. “Identity, location, plurality: Women, nationalism, and Northern Ireland” in R. Wilford & R. L. Miller (Eds.), Women, ethnicity, and nationalism: The politics of transition New York: Routledge. 50

strategies they believe are necessary to the overall welfare of the people living in the North of Ireland.

“My group came to the agreement that there is a need for professional people to work with children and families and women on subjects of loss, and what they lost, and who they lost, and the tortures they endured in the conflict. We also thought of a helpline for days that are bad. Some people don’t like to talk face-to-face. There’s helplines for people who are feeling low. Why not a helpline for survivors of trauma?”

“Our group wants workshops just like this for people to speak openly, respectfully, and freely. Group weekends like this give people a chance, if they want, to talk and participate and listen to other people’s stories. Your stories might be bad and someone else’s might be 10 times worse. We learn that we are not alone.”

“Grief sessions where people join in and express themselves and hear each other’s stories so you get the feeling that you’re not on your own. Have professionally educated women who are good listeners and who let you do the talking and give you a bit of support for your frustration, your anger, and give you the chance to speak about it.”

“We thought it would be very good to have counselors because whenever bad experiences happened in the conflict there was nobody there to tell us what path to take, who to talk to, where to go, and what they could do for us. The women in this room have been bereaved and are still trying to cope with the bereavement, some longer than others. We also want legal guidance. We were talking that if anybody was ever brought to justice, who would be the best person to go to and learn what all the legalities mean? And whether you get a conviction or you don’t, they can help people cope with the yes or the no. You want to go to someone who knows what this is all about, somebody who has worked on an inquiry before and can give a bit of help to you and not leave you hanging so you don’t know what is going happen.”

“We also want family support. There are still families that cannot speak about their experiences. Emotional support for all families across the board. That can help us cope with the emotions that we’ve been through so we can teach our children and our grandchildren about what happened.”

“We need therapists. We have massage therapists come into our community and do a 6-week course with an individual and they give you a hand massage, or massage your back, or your hands. It helps you relax and have some time for yourself. We all need time for ourselves. Some of the women here were saying they don’t have a community center so we need to find ways for those women to benefit from this kind of therapy.”

The resources the women discussed are directly linked to the women’s own lived experiences and address, among other things, psychological and emotional needs, legal issues, family services, various therapies, and women-only workshops. Thus they should not be viewed as “a laundry list of what women want and need post-conflict”.

Rather, Cohn argues that “in order to understand women’s experiences, we need to understand the contexts within which those differing experiences are embedded13” and respond to their needs accordingly. In other words, the women want counselors who have experience with and knowledge about working with women and families affected by violence and conflict. They want legal advice from people who are familiar with the inquiry process and can negotiate the myriad aspects of it while at the same time, keeping families informed and up-to-date about its progress. They want women to be key participants in any and all decisions regarding the development, allocation, and implementation of much-needed resources aimed at reweaving lives and communities.

It is clear that the vital and important work that these women, and the women in the North of Ireland have done on the ground for well over 30 years, has not always been supported by the decision-makers in the formal political structures in the North of Ireland. Instead, the focus on the state, national, and international level has been on ending the conflict, stopping the high intensity violence, and forming a government that is accepted by and acceptable to the people living in the North of Ireland. Yet the majority of those traumatized and/or affected by the conflict have not been integral partners in that process. Here is where UNSCR 1325 can make a difference. It is, or should be, a muscular tool for creating legitimate spaces for women to actively participate in all stages of the post-conflict process. UNSCR 1325 needs to vocally and visibly accompany that movement.
Urban Group Concluding Reflections

One of the activities the women engaged in was an activity that had as its core the poetry of Maya Angelou, the African American writer and poet. The women watched a 4-minute video of Ms. Angelou reading one of her poems entitled: "Still I Rise".

Once listened to, the women used watercolors to paint whatever image came to their minds as they listened to a poem that speaks about the hope and perseverance of women who are enslaved by the hatefulness of oppressors. After the women completed their paintings, they shared them with the group. One woman drew a cruise ship on the ocean and described it this way: “It’s meant to be a cruise ship with loads of people. And the sea is a woman because she can bring you out of danger and she can be calm and she can be strong. . . . She keeps you level on your ways.”

Another woman drew a sunrise and stated, “Mine is just the sun coming up and the birds are meant to be freedom. They’re free and the sun always comes back out again, very strong.”

Another painting represented what many of the women envisioned: “Mine is the Phoenix rising from the ashes. It’s also the symbol of the struggles that we have gone through. And it represents the area where I come from after the place got burnt out. It was like the Phoenix rising. That’s really the story.”

For the women participating, the violence and the social suffering associated with the conflict are not over. They are interspersed with the women’s hopes for a more peaceful existence for their children. “The families are still picking up the pieces. As much as the families want to move on, it’s hard. It’s awful hard.”

“Mine is the Phoenix rising from the ashes. It’s also the symbol of the struggles that we have gone through. And it represents the area where I come from after the place got burnt out. It was like the Phoenix rising. That’s really the story.”

It will be less so when the full weight of UNSCR 1325 is brought to bear on those whose responsibility it is to place women at the forefront of creating a peaceful, just, and equitable post-conflict process aimed at fostering individual, family, and community well being.
Rural Group

‘In the past, the impact of conflict on women has been barely acknowledged in international law and as a result, women’s experiences have been largely denied, kept private and written out of history.’

(U.N. Women)

Introduction

In order to ensure full participation in our UNSCR 1325 working group, Relatives for Justice decided to establish a rural based focus exploring the themes which occurred throughout the urban residential. A weekend of workshops was organised which was attended by 12 women. Most came from Counties Tyrone, Armagh and Down. Five major interlinked themes came out of the workshops: silence, women and family, isolation, on-going impact, and need for resolution and recovery. This report analyses each of these themes using extensive quotes from the women that took part in the workshops.

Methodology

Over the weekend, the women engaged in a series of workshops aimed at extracting their experience of the conflict. The age range of the participants was 23 to 63. Some had met before whilst others had not. Many of the women had family connections – as sisters or mother/daughter. The facilitator began by explaining UNSCR 1325. It was noted that although the British government has adopted the resolution it has not been applied to the conflict here. The conflict is not even mentioned in the British national action plan. By contrast the Irish government has referenced the conflict in their national action plan. The facilitator explained that in the face of limited government actions, work on 1325 is taking place through grassroots activities and that the residential workshop was part of this process.

The work began with participants remembering people they had lost. Names were written on a piece of paper and candles were lit to hold the memories of those who had been killed. The facilitator then emphasised that people would be invited to speak but not put under pressure, that speaking was voluntary and that listening and presence was important.

The workshops unfolded using a variety of methods to take forward the conversation. The women were presented with quotes taken from an oral history archive about the experience of the conflict. These spoke of women’s roles, and experiences in conflict and participants were asked to respond. In a later session the women responded to another quote about the long-term impact of conflict and in the final session the participants were asked to complete sentences about experience of loss during the conflict with all contributing to this process. The statements could be expressed vocally to the group or inwardly. Each person held an object while making their statement and this helped each person to take the space whether through outward or inward voice. Throughout all the sessions two note takers took notes and the final session was recorded. The note takers and facilitator also took part in the final session. Direct quotations from these sessions are used throughout the report without identifying the speaker. The purpose of the residential was to create a safe space to enable the women to share their experience.

Silence

One striking feature of the workshops was the presence of silence. From the beginning it was clear that a number of the women welcomed the assurance that no one would be pressured to speak and while they were fully present...
in the workshops they did not verbally contribute. In the final session of the residential the importance of silence became more obvious. The women were invited to finish a series of sentences and each woman contributed to this process. Space was given to each participant to contribute in words or silence and this was formalised by holding an object while the statement was being made before passing this object on to another person to make their statement. Because they were told it was valid to speak inwardly or outwardly a formal space was given to silence as an active presence in this sharing of experience. A number of women took this space and their silence was their contribution to the session.

Some academic work has explored the significance of women’s silence in truth recovery processes. Ñ Aoáin et al comment on a pattern of women’s silence in official fora for truth recovery noting that some women are literally unable to publicly articulate the harm that has happened to them: “Truth processes are intended to open up spaces of narrative and voice. A particular feature of women’s testimony to these fora is that many victims are literally unable to articulate the harms they have experienced to the audience.” The writers go on to say that women’s silence in testimony to official truth recovery processes is a recurring pattern that needs to be paid attention to and also that this silence cannot be ignored. “Public silences are a persistent feature of women’s testimonial presentations in truth telling contexts. Those silences should not be read as non-statements about the experiences of women.” Although these writers are speaking about public testimony rather than the more intimate space of the Relatives for Justice residential, the presence of silence in this forum is indicative of the need to pay attention to women’s silent testimony. This is a challenge for processes that depend on voiced testimony but ways of hearing the silence need to be found in these processes, if women’s experience of harms is to be fully heard and understood.

**Women and family**

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the workshops was that gender harms must be understood in the context of women’s relationship to family. Women experienced the greatest harm through the killing of family members. This loss and its consequences defined their lives through the impact on them directly, the impact on other family members and the unresolved nature of the loss which necessitated a search for the truth. The women expressed deep grief at the violent loss of their loved ones and this grief was inseparable from the effect on other family members.

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15 Ñ Aoáin Ñ ‘On the Frontlines: Gender, War and Post Conflict Processes’ Oxford (2011) 183
See also Ñ Aoáin F and Rooney E ‘Under-enforcement and Intersectionality: Gendered Aspects of Transition’ International Journal for Transitional Justice 1

16 Ibid 184
or wounding of family members. This reflects the overall gender pattern of conflict deaths - 91% of those killed were male. For many of the women participants the deaths meant that they had to take on the sole responsibility for maintaining their families both materially and emotionally. Most of them did that while campaigning for a proper inquest and report about what happened to their relatives.

As carers, the weight of the whole family's trauma fell on the women's shoulders, together with the obligation to put aside their own mourning processes, needs and lives and continue with caring work and, in many cases, also with being the bread-winner. Women bore the emotional and psychological needs of others, and also the mourning, frustration and pain of their relatives. Although motherhood and caring are generally perceived as passive roles, they didn't experience it in this way. Actually they felt they had to be an extra person in order to deal with everything.

The consequences of the conflict for mothers and family carers in general were not only the emotional loss accompanied by frustration, anxiety and depression but also the material cost. When the conflict ‘knocked on their door’ their workload rose.

“Most of the people killed were men. That left widows raising their kids alone with no economic help. They had to pay the bills, the education of their children, everything.”

“You prioritise your family and your role as a mother and you focus all your energy on that but you still need to work, to be independent and to be busy to get your mind off. You have to be one and a half to cover everything.”

In many cases women struggled financially as the jobs open to women were low paid, part-time and unskilled. This fitted the pattern of women's work at the time. This pattern was not exclusively a consequence of the conflict but of the sexual division of labour that restricted women's access to remunerated jobs and higher education17. The effect of this on women bereaved by the conflict however should be understood as a gendered socio economic harm when considering the impact of the conflict.

The participants discussed the dilemmas women faced. One of these was the prioritising of children's welfare and care before everything else and the suppression of feelings and self in order to put family first, dedicating less time to grieve themselves to cope with others' grief. Some participants reflected on the lives they could have lived and the effect of putting aside their own interests and lives to hold the family safe and together. There was awareness about the sacrifices they made.

“My family is fine now. I did what I should and now all of them are fine. That's the struggle.”

Another dilemma was that of moving on and continuing with their lives or focusing on the fight for truth and justice. This struggle between wanting to live a normal life and living a life in quest of truth and justice was also transmitted to the new generations, also affected by the trauma and the loss of their families in what is known as transgenerational trauma. That means children grew up in a climate of grief, anger and frustration and their lives are still being shaped by events that took place generations before. For these families, the war is not over because truth and justice have not been achieved. A very strong theme that emerged was the need to protect family members from further harm. There was a very deep fear for safety of other family members.

“You feel responsible to keep your kids far from conflict. Their safety was my main occupation. Especially the fear. You are afraid of strange cars, you’re afraid at night in case somebody comes into the house. You are scared if the children are out, in case they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. You become extremely overprotective.”

Harassment, in the form of checkpoints, trivial arrests or calls at family homes for non-existent reasons, contributed to this experience of hyper-vigilance and danger.

“You live with fear thinking that one of your sons could be the next one. You become paranoid. In my case, police never left my door. They were always watching you, just to keep you at home, scared.”

Another dimension to this was the fear that the absence of justice would drive husbands or fathers to seek revenge which would result in further family trauma.

“When they killed my son my husband fell into a depression. Those responsible were never punished. My husband felt he wasn’t a good enough father because he had not avenged the death of his son. Others were asking him why he hadn’t sorted it out. I told him: I’ll break your legs if you do that. I don’t want to suffer more.”

While women worried about and suffered on behalf of their families this was also the source of emotional support and strength for the women.

“My family keeps me going. Keep them all together, don’t let it get too hard for them.”

“My children make me believe that it’s so important to make it better for them than it was for us.”

“What keeps me going is the strength of my mother and father. And most definitely the wider circle of family and friends that cross the door and come and give their support and help.”

Isolation

“Even if women are not directly wounded during armed conflict, the devastation suffered by their families and the threat of violence can contribute to women’s isolation.”

Isolation was a strong theme and three strands of isolation were apparent in the experiences shared by the women: the mental isolation inherent within trauma, the isolation as a result of living in a rural area, and the isolation within their own community.

Isolation is frequently associated with traumatic bereavement during conflict where there has been no resolution or accountability for the death. The lack of acknowledgment also marginalises the victim.

Living in isolated areas or small mixed communities eroded women’s sense of safety and security.

Although there was some support from friends and neighbours in the community there was also isolation that was very hard to bear. Women talked about the exclusion and lack of support, which increased their isolation. Sometimes they were avoided because other people were afraid of becoming targets for harassment and threat by state forces by association with the bereaved family. The women also talked about the pressure to move on and leave the past behind.

“It’s really hard not to have the support of your community when you decide to fight to recover the truth about who killed your beloved one. Especially when everybody says ‘just leave it behind you and move on’.”

Ongoing Impact

The lack of resolution, truth and acknowledgement has meant that the women are trapped in a mourning process and that they are forced to carry the burden of
campaigning for the truth about the death of their loved one. This is compounded by the absence of reliable and trustworthy official processes and ongoing low level harassment from security forces. Many of the women reported that family members are still being pulled over on the road for trivial or non-existent reasons. This is felt by the women as the police letting families know they are still vulnerable. One woman describes it as the police communicating the message ‘we are watching you, we can get you anywhere, at any time’.

With family histories of state forces carrying out harassment, brutality and murder it has resulted in a total lack of trust in these forces. How is it possible to recognise such forces when they have carried out such actions with impunity? It was explained that the police force know these women are vulnerable and defenseless and want to keep them that way so they do not fight for truth and justice for their lost loved ones.

It is often felt by victims that they are purposely being kept vulnerable and defenseless. Too many actors of the conflict do not want truth and justice to proceed. There has been so much money spent on concealing the truth. Some women spoke of resentment for those in the Assembly – sometimes actually hindering rather than uncovering the truth, misinformation going unchallenged and also evidence going missing.

“...They called me 25 years later from the hospital where my son died. They were going to destroy all the evidence, claiming health and safety reasons. The clothes he was wearing when they shot him were key evidence and they wanted to make them disappear.”

“They showed us a report, but my mummy didn’t want to read it, it was full of lies.”

Need for Resolution and Recovery

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said; “The right to the truth is both an individual and a collective right. Each victim has the right to know the truth about violations against them, but the truth also has to be told more widely as a safeguard to prevent violations from happening again.”

Three themes emerged from the workshop: Need for Therapeutic support/ Importance of Truth and acknowledgment/ Right to Reparations.

There are still families that cannot deal with the experience of loss and trauma and the women talked about the need for therapeutic family support:

‘...because as a unit, we can listen to siblings and learn to teach our children and our grandchildren about our feelings and how to address them. For large families, there are people born after the conflict and yet they are living with others who did live through it so how to deal with that, we need help with that.’

During the weekend, every participant spoke of the need for truth and also, their fear of the conflict impacting on their children and grandchildren. They, like many others want to know what happened to their loved ones, who was responsible in the killing of their loved ones and how they can be held to account. Throughout the conflict, there were no counseling services for these women. They feel whenever bad experiences happened there was no one there to say what path to take, who to talk to, where to go, what they could do. These women are still bereaved; they are still trying to cope. They feel if there had been support for them throughout the conflict, they may not be as raw and would have begun the healing process a long time ago.

With 91% of those killed in our conflict being male the natural corollary is that women survived and were witness to violations. Whether through engagement with justice agencies, inquest systems, Historical Enquiries Team or the Police Ombudsman Office, women are required to be active participants in processes to which they have little influence while also managing their own and their family’s trauma.

Andrée Murphy, Deputy Director of Relatives for Justice, provides an argument for a gender focus in the transitional debate. She states, ‘the truth is that most families irrespective of the circumstances, do not expect anyone to go to jail for these deaths. For some that possibility was either never open, because the British state was responsible for the killing and responsible for the investigation and responsible for deciding whether anyone should be held accountable - which they only did in three cases. For others with the passage of time it is now nigh impossible to achieve a realistic chance of prosecution in most cases.’ She continues; ‘indeed for some families who believed that the state would act in their interest it is harder for them – they have been let down and disillusioned at the worst time in their lives. However, what most families do want – and need – is truth and acknowledgement’.

The women spoke of the need for truth and the importance of Truth recovery in their own healing and the building of a post-conflict society/between communities and also within the same community. Everyone experienced the conflict in their own way; truth recovery is about experiences, harms and roles; during and after the conflict.

“It is just the truth about what really happened, so simple. There is a lot of misinformation in the books, the press, and the official records. It is sad for me to think that my parents are going to die without knowing who killed their son and why.”

“I cannot afford a proper inquiry. You see families trying to push and you rejoice for every one of their victories. That gives you some strength. You don’t think about revenge, you just can think about uncovering the truth.”

“My father was killed by the UVF. Nobody has ever been arrested for that and they destroyed evidence. We are organised with other families to find the answers that we need, waiting a green light to an inquiry, pending on a judicial review. We are funding all the legal costs.”

“You feel everybody says ‘put that under the carpet or pay if you want to know the truth’. You feel you don’t deserve truth, nobody gives you a straight answer.”

“We always have had our suspicions about some people from the area who were believed to be members of the UVF. But, of course, there was never any real investigation. We think that it was also a case of collusion. There were always military and police checkpoints surrounding the village, we couldn’t enter or leave the village without being controlled, but strangely there wasn’t any checkpoint this night.”

Truth telling requires the identification of gross systematic crimes and human rights violations committed. In the North of Ireland there is a significant deficiency in addressing such issues, much to the detriment of surviving victims. Many of these female victims have suffered at the hands of the British state, mostly through collusion. Murphy argues that those affected by state or state sponsored violence become disaffected from state agencies. They have been let down from day one. They knew that the killings were not properly investigated. They were left with no one and nothing. They just had to get on with surviving on their own.

In relation to those women on the residential; it is true to say they are disillusioned by politicians as there is consistently no consensus on the issue of dealing with the past. They lack trust in government bodies, which is understandable given the fact that the British government were actors in the conflict. The state, the police and other organisations have been involved in the killings of their loved ones, involved in cover-ups and have encouraged family members to be informers in order to gain information.

“No politician takes care of you. They talk and talk but nobody actually does anything to help give you the truth you are demanding. The UK doesn’t take any responsibility for what happened here the last 40 years. We want the truth. They have invested millions to avoid us knowing the truth.”

With this, there is a serious concern in relation to inequalities within reparations. Any reparations programme – whether statutory or community based -requires a gender sensitive approach to ensure equal participation of women. A holistic approach, which values safety, trust and process, is needed to guarantee that the needs of women are met. Providing a safe, non-judgmental environment is essential in tending to women’s needs. Trust is a major factor due to the harms experienced by women in our conflict. These

20 Andrée Murphy, “An Argument for a Gender Focus in the Transitional Debate” Relatives for Justice (February 2010)
women need to be provided with a place of safety, which begins with understanding the needs of all victims and survivors. The principles of reparation are well established in International Law. The UN Basic Principles recognise the following forms of Reparation: restitution, rehabilitation in terms of psychological and physical support, compensation, satisfaction in terms of acknowledgement and guarantees of non-repetition. UN Women agree ‘development is not a substitute for reparation. While development is a right for all, reparation is a right for a specific subset of people; those who have been victims of human rights violations. Reparation has intrinsic value in that it restores victims’.

It is vital that the inequalities are targeted within the north of Ireland when discussing reparations due to the already existent disparity. There have been severance packages for military personnel and these packages that are in place are completely different to those in place for others. There is division. There is a hierarchy of victims. It is degrading for many victims to avail of an under-funded service whilst benevolent funds are in place for others. It is extremely hard for this particular group of women who have been affected by collusion to see the firing and re-hiring of police officers, some who acted with impunity. Throughout the residential there was a general feeling of discontent amongst the women when discussing victim’s services.

“State forces receive pensions for being “victims” but we don’t. A lot of people don’t want to receive it, but it’s about the inequality, the difference. Why some are receiving financial help and others receive nothing”.

“The RUC were even paid with new dentures, but nobody can help us to pay a lawyer for such a long process”.

“We are never going to get the truth if that depends on your ability to pay. It’s just open the files, tell the truth. That costs nothing”.

“You’re inside a vicious circle. You can’t obtain any help because you’re working and earning too much money. You cannot obtain a grant for your kids’ education because you are working, despite the fact you are paying everything alone because somebody killed your husband. It is so disrespectful”.

The non-recognition of the existence of the conflict on the part of United Kingdom evades the obligation to ensure victims get justice, truth and reparation. Both UNSCR1325 and ECHR establish reparations for that kind of victim. It is clear women experience conflict differently from men therefore women have gender specific needs post conflict. When establishing transitional mechanisms, the participation of women is crucial. It is essential, that if the north of Ireland is to fully recover from conflict and history to not repeat itself, reparations must be addressed appropriately and with integrity. It is also vital for women to be at the fore of the creation of any mechanism. Chinkin observes that the full and equal inclusion of women at the design stage offers better solutions for all to the dilemmas of transitional justice mechanisms, without consulting women on the creation and design of these mechanisms, risks undermining their effectiveness.
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Final Word
Much work remains to be done. This project was the beginning of a process and a tangible commitment to women directly affected by conflict. The value of Peace and Reconciliation monies to this type of unique and innovative project cannot be underestimated. Long term resources that support process driven recovery are required to ensure that this commitment is realized.