

WOMEN AND THE CONFLICT

Talking about the “Troubles”
and Planning for the Future

Women’s Resource and Development Agency



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FOREWORD

There are people within our communities – including business, religious and political leaders - who see no value in talking about the past. Their only concern is to leave the “Troubles” behind us by ‘drawing a line’, ‘closing the door’, and escaping from the past, almost as if nothing of significance took place. Such a position may have good and bad motives. Moving forward without the personal and communal baggage of past rights and wrongs releases new optimism and energies, enables more risk taking and encourages relationships, projects and investments that would have been unthinkable 15 or 20 years ago. On the other hand, there are some who are unchanged and who are unable to acknowledge that the years of conflict and hatred, whether expressed through physical violence or in other ways, have had lasting effects on every aspect of our society and daily lives. In other words there are people who tell us to move on without registering the need for change, without seeing what needs to be repaired and compensated for, and without understanding that trust in public affairs and private lives is built on accountability, respect and honesty.

The impression is often given, from here and elsewhere, that the problem of dealing with the past is primarily a psychological one belonging only to a minority of traumatised individuals. We now know that the problem is much bigger and more complex than this. There is systematic evidence from a range of sources showing that the legacies of the conflict are imprinted in poor physical and mental health, high levels of alcohol and drug use, high rates of incapacity, low aspirations, poor economic performance, low employment rates, stunted educational achievement and a whole range of material inequalities. It is also clear that patterns of personal and communal damage are all too easily passed on from one generation to the next.

But there is another dimension to all this. So much of the public debate about the past and the future is conducted by men, about men and largely for men. This is understandable given the predominance of men in the frontline of the conflict – as soldiers, police or prison officers, or as members of the armed groups. As this report shows, however, while some women matched men in frontline roles, they also had distinctive experiences of the conflict, associated with their predominance in organising and sustaining family life, and the roles they take within local communities. This is the first report of its kind demonstrating this point from the perspective of a wide range of women of all ages and backgrounds.

The women’s accounts span the generations of the conflict from the 1960s onwards. We hear snatches of blighted childhoods, traumatic events, fights for survival, endurance of long-term physical and emotional hardship, strategies for ‘getting by’, great courage in organisation and co-operation. The accounts represent the full range of community and personal experiences of the “Troubles” across the neighbourhoods most affected. They are important in their own right and because they illustrate the impact of violence and the nature and extent of the legacies of the “Troubles” more broadly.

It is well-understood from the international research that peace building and social and economic reconstruction are most successful where women are consciously and actively involved in political and civic institutions. Indeed this is an international obligation as reflected in United Nations’ resolutions, policies and actions most specifically in United Nations Resolution 1325 on ‘Women, Peace and Security.

This is an excellent and important report. I urge people to read it in the spirit of understanding what we all need to know in order to construct better lives in the future.

MIKE TOMLINSON

Professor of Social Policy, Queen’s University Belfast.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Participants

- During 2007-2008 116 women from 10 groups, from Protestant and Catholic and rural and urban areas across Northern Ireland were engaged in a series of structured workshops about how their lives and communities were affected by violence. They also discussed key issues to be addressed by policy makers in areas of safety, health and education. The workshops were facilitated by Community Facilitators trained by the Women's Resource and Development Agency and the project was coordinated by the WRDA.
- The project was developed by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership and funded by CFNI under the Peace II 2.4 measure. It involved ten women's groups: Windsor Women's Centre, Greenway Women's Centre, Larne Women's group, Corpus Christi, Relatives for Justice, Galbally Women's Group in South Tyrone, Carrickfergus Women's Forum, Forkhill Women's Group and Derry Shared City project, which included two mixed religion groups.

Impacts of the conflict

- Memories of the impact of the conflict on communities were strikingly similar across rural and urban and protestant and catholic groups. There were shared memories of the beginnings of trouble in 1969, roadblocks, checkpoints, and soldiers on the streets.
- Women from all backgrounds recalled the hardships occasioned by the Ulster Workers' Council strike in 1974. Many recalled shortages of (and queues for) basics such as bread, milk and butter, and lack of electricity, gas or even coal.
- Fear, worry, and "not understanding" were common themes between rural and urban, and Catholic and Protestant groups when recalling childhood and rearing children. The conflict impacted on play in rural and urban areas: one rural woman recalled "No more blackberries – it was too dangerous to play in local fields in case of booby traps. It was the end of innocence". An urban woman recalled playing outside her sister's house near to an army barracks which was bombed: "I never went back to stay there" she said.
- One word characterised the way that women spoke about all of their roles and relationships within the family - "worry". Women worried about their children, with many on both sides, both rural and urban, trying to keep their children away from involvement with paramilitary groups, and out of trouble. Women worried about their brothers who often were in danger of becoming involved in the conflict, or were already involved, or in prison. For others, their worry was for fathers or brothers in the police
- Women from across all groups shared much in terms of the emotional impact of the Troubles. Many reported sadness, stress, depression, anger, worry and anxiety. Many women coped through friendships and mutual support, others through God and religion. Many women reported simply "blocking out" what was going on, and just getting on with things. Others coped by going out with friends, music, and dating. Some women felt that their love for their children got them through. Many others used medication to get by, something which they described as "freely available and shared between friends" and some found comfort in alcohol.
- Some women were active participants in the conflict, performing a variety of roles. Many women testified that the increasing levels of responsibility they shouldered as a result of the imprisonment of male family members led to increased confidence in their own abilities.
- Community education and the role of women's groups were vital in developing cross-community activities from the 1980s onwards.

Key issues

- Women stated that they felt "ordinary" crime to be worse now than during the conflict and they feared drugs, knife crime, happy-slapping, attacks on older people and attacks on women.
- They felt the streets were less safe for women than during the years of the troubles.
- Mental health needs, particularly stress-related health problems and post-traumatic stress, increasing levels of suicide and the abuse of drugs and alcohol had to be addressed.
- The decline in health services caused great concern, with calls for more staff in hospitals, better levels of hygiene, and greater accessibility of GPs.
- Resources were needed to improve parenting skills.
- Rural women called for gender-proofing of all rural issues, in particular the need for improved local transport services for rural areas.
- Lack of funding for women's community-based education was an urgent issue for politicians to consider.
- Low levels of literacy and numeracy and lack of access for working class children to higher level education.
- The lack of representation of women had to be addressed and more encouragement given to young women.

THE PROJECT: AIMS AND APPROACH

Ten years on from the 1998 Agreement, with devolution reactivated, there is increasing debate on ways to acknowledge and address the past in Northern Ireland. The Consultative Group on the Past was established in June 2007 with the remit of consulting the community on the best way to deal with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. The Group announced its initial conclusions at an event on 29 May 2008, and although ideas on the way forward have now been aired, there remains to be an official resolution on how the past is to be addressed. Our concern is to ensure that the experiences of women are included within any future initiative. This project points to the importance of women's continuing involvement in that process at both a community and a strategic level.

At a grass roots level, a range of initiatives which could be broadly encompassed under the heading "dealing with the past" have been undertaken. The conflict of the last forty years affected men, women and children, and touched all aspects of personal, family and community life. Some community-based women's groups, recognising this, have already sought to capture the stories of local women, through media as diverse as quilts, art, and video interviews.

From November 2007 to May 2008 WRDA Community Facilitators provided a series of workshops to ten women's groups across Northern Ireland. These women's groups were from both rural and urban settings and from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. A total of 116 women took part.

The purpose of the project was two-fold. Firstly, through the project WRDA wanted to give women an opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences of the 'Troubles' and secondly, to enable the women involved in the project to highlight the issues that affected them during the 'Troubles' and to compare and contrast these with current issues that have an impact on women's lives.

The workshops were carefully crafted to allow free flowing discussion and experience sharing whilst also ensuring that mechanisms were in place for recording these experiences as accurately as possible. The recording methods not only took into account what was being verbalised by the women but also what was not - for example, body language, comfort levels, willingness to share certain experiences.

The challenge for WRDA was to design workshops that allowed Community Facilitators to create an environment where women felt comfortable and safe enough to remember their lives during the 'Troubles' and share these experiences with the other members of the group, whilst simultaneously trying to record these stories in a true, appropriate and accurate and unobtrusive manner.

Experiential activities were developed that allowed participants to have a sense of ownership over the workshops. For example, the first activity was a Group Timeline which enabled the group to establish when they felt the 'Troubles' started and ended, and how they wanted to refer to the last 30 years: the 'Troubles', the 'Conflict', the 'Struggle', the 'War' etc. It also encouraged groups to use their own terminology and to self-define. This activity also gave women an opportunity to reflect on what was happening in Northern Ireland as a whole during this period and what was happening to them personally. Whilst specific events were happening in the community, bombings, shootings, husbands and fathers being arrested, 'normal life' was carrying on. Women were attending school, finding work, getting married, starting and raising families.



HELEN McLAUGHLIN presenting the draft report to the conference

There was also a focus on specific aspects of women's lives and an activity was developed that enabled participants to explore gender roles during the 'Troubles' and to reflect on how women coped as sisters, daughters, wives and mothers against the back drop of violence and unrest that was typical of many communities. Discussions were also facilitated in relation to the important issues that affected women during the 'Troubles', and the key issues affecting women today. Comparisons were made as to whether the issues were better, worse or the same now as they were during the 'Troubles'.

Once groups had participated in the workshops we felt it was important to bring urban and rural women together to meet and share their experience of participating in the project. We did this through a series of residentials that enabled women from different backgrounds and locations to meet each other and compare and contrast any differences in the issues they had identified as still being relevant to women today. The residentials also provided an opportunity for WRDA to value and appreciate how open and honest women involved in the project had been in sharing and discussing what were for some, very painful experiences and memories and trusting us to record their stories appropriately. To show our appreciation we arranged for complementary therapists to be available to help participants relax and enjoy the residential.

The project culminated in a conference, held at the Glenavon Hotel Cookstown on 5 June 2008, to which everyone who participated in the project was invited. Extracts from the talk given by Cynthia Cockburn are given at the conclusion of the report.

When reviewing the materials produced in the workshops, some themes clearly emerged, and it is around these themes that the report is structured. This means that, in the main, aspects of individual women's stories appear under themed headings, rather than as complete personal portraits, an approach which reflects our commitment to respect women's privacy and to find ways of presenting information which avoids as far as possible identifying individual participants. While it is not possible in a report of this nature to include every detail of each woman's story, we do hope that the report puts on paper for the first time an impression of the kinds of experiences, emotions, hopes and fears of women from a range of backgrounds across Northern Ireland, over the last four decades, and that it captures a sense of the issues which are impacting on their lives today.

Terminology

While it has been broadly useful to designate groups as Protestant or Catholic, the picture is of course more complex than those designations suggest, with some groups having a small proportion of members from "the other community". One group was entirely mixed. Similarly, while it has been useful to designate groups rural and urban, there were also complexities within this designation. Not all participants in rural women's groups had spent their whole lives in a rural area - some women had spent their childhood and early adulthood in Belfast and then moved to a rural area later in life. Some women had also lived outside of Northern Ireland for periods of their lives, ranging from a year or two, to decades, and then returned. Some rural groups are based in estates which, despite their location, share many similarities with urban estates. The terms Protestant and Catholic and rural and urban are used as an aid to comment and analysis, and with respect to the women in each group, whose diversity is acknowledged.

The use of language remains a delicate issue in Northern Ireland. In particular, there has been debate in recent years about the use of the term "the Troubles" to describe a serious civil conflict in which many people lost their lives. The term "conflict" is now preferred in some circles. Acknowledging this debate, we have attempted as far as possible to vary our use of language in this report, in respect of both positions. However, where quotations are given, each individual woman's choice of language is respected and retained.

Sources

It is central to this project that its principal source is the input of the women who participated in the facilitated sessions. The only external source to which we have referred is the University of Ulster's CAIN website (www.cain.ulst.ac.uk), which is used to supply dates and summary details of specific events mentioned by women in their contributions. All dates and details are cited as presented on CAIN on 28 June 2008 and are supplied in Notes at the end of the report.

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The Impact on Family Life

SECTION ONE

The Impact on Family Life

1. No More Blackberries: Children and Childhood

The conflict largely revolved around the aspirations and actions of adults, yet throughout women's recollections are memories of incidents which affected either themselves as children, or which impacted upon their own children. Many women who participated in the project had been children or teenagers during the early part of the Troubles and therefore recalled the '60s, '70s, or '80s through the prism of childhood or teenage experience. Some participants were teenage girls themselves, born in the '90s, alongside the emergent Peace Process. Many women had become mothers during the conflict, and so also had stories of the impact on their own children. Women from all groups spoke both of specific incidents, and also of the wider impact of living in a troubled society as a child or a young person. Women's childhood reflections tended not to encompass the large-scale events impacting on the Troubles at a Northern Ireland-wide level, but focused on events and impacts closer to home.

1.1 Raids and disruption to home life

House raids by the army featured regularly in the memories of Catholic women in particular, both urban and rural. For them, the key emotion associated with raids and the presence of soldiers in the community, was fear. One urban woman recalled: "Our house got raided a lot. Soldiers about a lot, road blocks, searches. I was very afraid of them when I was younger". Women in rural areas reported a similar level of fear: "I remember being very scared when I first heard soldiers patrolling around our house – I thought we were all going to be murdered in our beds". One mother recalled: "Following a local shooting in the '90s, there were a lot of house searches. My house was searched on different mornings and my young family were put out of bed around 4 in the morning. It was very frightening for the family". A small number of Protestant women also mentioned army raids. One Protestant group recalled: "Army house raids. Kids loved the excitement but parents resentful of the army especially when the army called them orange bastards".

For one woman from an urban Catholic group, raids were just another aspect of the general turmoil which impacted on every aspect of family life: "My family home was blown up. Our home was raided every night and day. My sister and brother were both injured in a bomb. I became a bit of a rebel at home. No Christmas at home".

Some women recalled family members (fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins) being shot, killed or injured by bombs while they were still children. A woman from a rural Protestant group had detected high levels of anxiety at home: "My mother was constantly worried and suspicious of every stranger who appeared in our street. She was angry and troubled. I was the only child at home then". A woman from an urban Protestant group spoke of her fear as a child, "not knowing if Dad would come home when riots / barricades went up".

Broadly speaking, while Catholic women's most striking memories of disruption and intrusion to home life were centred around the '60s, '70s and '80s, and were concerned with army raids, Protestant women's most striking stories of disruption and intrusion into home life were centred on the '90s and up until the present day, and were concerned with paramilitarism. One woman from a rural Protestant group spoke of traumatic events from the '90s onwards: "Dad's lorry was burnt out. We moved to another estate. Granny's windows were put in while we slept in bed. Car tyres slashed. Daddy got jumped and shot at. Granny was burned out of her house, it was a mess – they killed my goldfish". This young woman was not alone. Other women in Protestant groups, particularly rural groups, had similar tales of intimidation and harassment targeted at the family home, including windows being repeatedly broken, cars being burned and tyres being slashed. One young woman's boyfriend had been beaten up by paramilitaries, and some had had to move out of areas due to intimidation.

1.1.2 Arrests and Prison

Memories of the arrest and imprisonment of family members was a strikingly regular feature of many Catholic women's childhood memories of the '60s, '70s and '80s in particular. Prison visits featured much less in Protestant women's stories. Some women's fathers had been arrested, interned or imprisoned, but for many women with family members in jail, it was their brothers who were "inside". For many of these women, prison played a significant part in their recollections of childhood. One woman remembered "making up food parcels for Long Kesh". Others remembered regular visits to prison, particularly to visit brothers. One rural woman recalled: "My brother was arrested in the '70s – I remember the police saying to my mother 'your son will come home in a box'". The sense of disruption to the whole family, including children, was expressed by one mother: "My son got taken from home in August '69. The house was all upset over not seeing him for 21 days. I rang all the people to find out where he was, then we had a hard time seeing him – all the family was upset about their brother".

Many women spoke of the psychological impact of family life and relationships fractured by the events of the conflict. One woman expressed a sense of loss which existed even before her father's death: "Grew up not knowing father, he was in jail...Blanket protest ('80s) – father was on it...Father blown up when I was 12 years old...I'm getting counselling to deal with the past – angry at father for not wanting me – able to fight for country but not for me". While many families supported family members in prison, this woman's view complicates that notion somewhat: clearly even within families there could be deeply complex feelings about the implications of someone's involvement in the Troubles. The immediate impact of this turmoil was different for different women. One woman felt that everything that happened "made me become really close to my family", whereas another felt alienated by events: "I never felt I belonged to my family".

1.1.3 Talking Politics?

It was clear from some women's feedback that even within families there were tensions about the conflict, and that this was often a source of anxiety when they were children. Broadly speaking, women in Catholic groups tended to report this tension manifesting itself in debate and discussion in the home, while women in Protestant groups tended to recall the need to "keep quiet", although there were recollections of both from both Catholic and Protestant women. Some women recalled serious differences of opinion about what was going on, with one woman from a rural Catholic group describing "different political views and heated debates" at home.

Despite the great impact of the Troubles on children, women's feedback suggests that there was no guarantee that they understood what it was all about. A number of women from both Protestant and Catholic groups felt that as children, they "did not understand what was happening". One woman recalled "trying to explain the situation to siblings even though I didn't understand myself", and another described "feeling very frightened and didn't really know why".

A small number of women from Catholic groups recalled that their parents had made a point of talking to them about the Troubles, with one woman remembering: "Dad watched the news morning and night and I listened to his usually politically-related stories". Another remembered "listening to mother's words of wisdom, and supporting her". However, one woman from an urban Catholic group recalled a policy of silence in the house: "I wasn't allowed to ask questions". A rural Catholic woman spoke of trying to "keep my own ideas, although not always easy to keep my mouth shut".

For some Protestant women, both urban and rural, home and family were places where as a child one learned the importance of silence. As one woman said: "A man was shot outside our house - I was young and scared. Then the Hunger Strikes. Mum told us not to talk about it outside – I didn't really understand. Mum and dad tried to keep us out of the troubles as much as possible". Another woman recalled: "My dad was in the Territorial Army (TA) and we were as a family told to be secretive and quiet about it, and not to talk to anyone outside our community. I was not allowed to attend cross-community youth activities". Another woman "knew to keep quiet when parents were talking about things that were happening", and another was "worried about mentioning anything about the troubles in case of upsetting anyone. My uncle was in the police – the family was always concerned about him". For some women, while silence was encouraged as a kind of survival mechanism in dangerous times, it also meant that there was a sense of uncertainty in childhood about what was going on which simply added to anxiety.

1.2 Role Reversal

1.2.1 Childhood responsibilities

Women across all groups recalled helping out at home as children and teenagers. Whether Catholic or Protestant, urban or rural, this involved cleaning, tidying, "going for messages", "babysitting for mum and everyone else", and sometimes "helping family finances by working after school".

What was more striking, however, was the number of women, particularly in urban communities, both Protestant and Catholic, who described not simply helping out but rather stepping into a parental role at a young age. In some cases this was due to the death and illness of mothers. One woman recalled: "Mother died when I was young, I had to take on the role to look after father, brothers and sisters". Another woman's childhood responsibilities were as the result of illness: "I was the mother figure in the family from Mother taking a stroke at 52 years of age".

Another had found herself “in charge of the house and kids as mum was working”. Women from both Protestant and Catholic groups spoke of bearing responsibilities in childhood which led to “growing up fast, becoming an adult too soon”. Phrases such as “taking on the role as head of the family”, and “becoming the adult” were common to both, with women recalling “learning to cook very young” and “cooking, cleaning and shopping” from an early age.

For other women, simply being the eldest in the family meant being charged with greater responsibility to do housework and, in particular, to look after siblings. One woman remembered “being kept off school to look after the younger ones”. Another became very protective of her siblings, and another had promised her parents “not to let my brothers out of my sight”. Again, there was little to distinguish feedback between urban Catholic and Protestant groups.

For many women, the caring role that they had taken on in childhood in relation to their parents, continued into adulthood. One woman described how she had “left my own house to help my mother cope, along with my husband and baby girl”. Another had “cared for mother while she had a broken leg and looked after brothers and sisters - then she had a stroke so I visited every day and looked after two households”. These stories were typical of many women’s experiences across all groups.

1.2.2 Worrying about mum and dad

Many women spoke of an additional childhood burden - that of worry. The words “worry” or “I worried about” cropped up with regularity in women’s feedback across all groups, rural and urban, Protestant and Catholic when recalling their childhood.

Some women described worrying about their parents’ wellbeing and ability to cope in the aftermath of specific events which had happened in their childhood. Protestant women both rural and urban, had similar worries: “My mother had her home and car burnt – I was scared in case they hurt her and felt sorry for her losing all her belongings and personal things”. Another woman “worried about mother’s health and safety – scared of what would happen next, felt I had to be strong for my mother because my father was good-for-nothing and didn’t care”. Another worried because “Mother was disabled and I worried she would get caught up in something”. Overall, there was a sense of women in their childhood and teenage years trying to protect and shield parents from the daily impacts of the Troubles. A woman from a Protestant group described feeling “worried about parents as there was a lot of explosions in the area, went to see parents every day”, and another recalled “constant worry and if I saw anything on the news I got really worried especially during the Ulster Workers’ Council strike”.

For Catholic women, both rural and urban, worry often centred on the involvement of family members in the conflict. One woman recalled “worry over how mother would cope with brother’s imprisonment”. Another was concerned about “mum and dad being harassed during house searches”, and another “worried about the attitude of RUC and security forces to my mother” following a brother’s imprisonment. A rural woman “worried about how my mum and dad would cope with their son’s death and worry about the other children”. A woman from a Catholic group remembered: “I wouldn’t tell my mum and dad half of what was going on – protecting them from worry”, and another: “I didn’t want to let my mum and dad know all about the harassment that my family were going through – always worried about annoying her in case she would fret about us all”.

Women also recalled childhood worries about fathers. For women whose fathers were in the police, worry was a constant companion: “I worried about my father who was in the police”, said one woman, as did another woman whose father had “joined police reserve in ‘60s”. One woman recalled “worrying about father going out at weekends, getting into trouble and fighting, even when it wasn’t his fault”.

Some women spoke of a general fear for fathers and brothers getting hurt or killed throughout the Troubles, and in particular around the time when the Shankill Butchers were active.

1.2.3 Brothers

Many women recalled caring for and looking after brothers in order to keep them “out of trouble”. A woman from an urban Protestant group recalled “keeping an eye out for wee brothers at the bonies (bonfires) and always watched what they were up to”, and another spoke of “worrying about older brothers when there was rioting”. Another worried that her “brother’s friends were into drugs – didn’t want him to get involved with them due to peer pressure”. For many women, the main focus of their care of brothers was to “make sure they didn’t enrol in paramilitaries” – a concern mentioned by many women across all groups.

Some women were aware that their brothers were involved in the conflict, which also caused them concern: “I worried about my brothers who I knew were involved in the provos” said one woman from a Catholic group. Another was concerned about “collusion, and siblings or parents being targeted because of who we were – we were related to an IRA man who was shot”.

For some women in Protestant groups, particularly in rural areas, their anxiety was centred on their brother’s employment in the security forces. As one woman put it: “My older brother joined the police in the 1960s – there was constant worry about where he was – we listened to the news on the radio, TV and newspapers”. Another woman remembered: “We worried a lot about my brother, he was in the UDR in the ‘80s”. One woman had a memory of her brother which stuck in her mind: “My brother joined the police in the late ‘60s. I have a memory of him coming home in his uniform after being involved in the riots in Derry - his clothes were dirty and torn – his face was blackened and he put his gun on the top of the shelf in the kitchen. He always did that”.

For some women in groups of all backgrounds, their worst fears were realised. A woman from a Protestant group described the impact of the troubles on the life of her brother and his family: “My brother had to retire from the police force between the ‘80s and ‘90s. He had a breakdown – suffered ‘post-traumatic stress syndrome’ - his life, and that of his family, was ruined. He spent time in a psychiatric unit, where he was terrified and he has never worked again”. Women from Catholic groups spoke of losing brothers as a result of the Troubles – in some cases, more than one. One woman from a Catholic group spoke of her grief at the death of her brother: “I was the life and soul of the party until my brother died – I was never the same after it”.

1.2.4 Sisters

When women spoke of sisters, feedback from women of all communities tended to focus on caring responsibilities, but also on mutual support and companionship. Some women remembered looking after younger sisters as children. One woman’s job was “to take my wee sister to school”. One woman remembered: “When my sister’s work was burnt out, remember hugging and crying with each other all the way home”. Some women from Protestant groups looked back on good times with sisters in their teenage years, going to the army disco together, and dating soldiers.

The caring relationships between sisters in childhood had continued for many into adulthood, with many women called upon to offer desperately needed support by sisters. One woman recalled “helping my sisters with children when husbands were away”. Another had the sad task of “looking after my sister’s children when she died”. Another woman remembered “helping my sisters through their bereavements, my children gave them comfort”.

Many women spoke of the psychological impact of family life and relationships fractured by the events of the conflict.

1.3 Community and childhood

Many women had memories of events in their local communities during their childhood. A woman from a Protestant group recalled: "I lived in Belfast as a child. Got evacuated to Liverpool for 6 weeks because Troubles got so bad. I remember shots being fired through our window and we had to lie on the floor or under the bed. We had to go to Church Hall every evening as there was a curfew. We had to crawl up the street, to the church, with soldiers lying on the ground to protect us. We stayed overnights in the church and returned home the next morning. It was only the women and children went to the church – the men stayed behind. We moved from Belfast because of Troubles. I think the UDA moved us because I remember after we moved we got trouble from our new neighbours – because we came from town we got called townies, and it took a long time before we were accepted. We ended up moving about 5 times before the age of 12. Mum couldn't seem to settle as she missed life and friends from town".

One woman identified the late '60s as the time that she was increasingly becoming aware of 'differences' in people in terms of religion: "Told I had to be careful around certain people as they could be 'bad' to me. Felt I had to keep to my own area in order to feel safer". This awareness seemed to enter the imagination and contribute to an atmosphere of fear. Another woman from a Protestant group remembered "boys around the bonfire 'guarding it' as you did, when someone said the Catholics were coming over the hill to get us. I was probably around 9 or 10 at the time and scuttled down into a bit of a hole and lay flat so they wouldn't see me. I am guessing I was scared".

Some women remembered going shopping with their mothers as a fraught experience. One woman from a rural Catholic group recalled: "My brother who was twelve was prevented from entering a shop by a British soldier who stood in his way. My mum was so angry and I felt the indignation and hurt". A woman from a rural Protestant group remembered being "caught up in rioting one Saturday afternoon when out shopping with my mother. Very frightening. Made me not want to go into the town. I was a young child. Felt anxious when in shops".

1.4 School

A common theme across groups of all backgrounds was the way that the conflict impacted on the school experience. For many, it was the journey to and from school which was the most stressful part of the day. One woman described "coming home from school in Newry never knowing if I would be able to get home because of bomb scares or explosions". Another spoke of "worrying when going to and from school as bus stoned frequently". Another woman had experienced bomb scares on the school bus: "I was scared" she recalled. Even when women were not directly affected, some still worried. One woman said: "I remember times when School was closed and we were all sent home – it was OK for me, I could walk home through a safe area, many of my friends had to be bused through area where the buses were often stoned." One mother remembered discovering that "the army was emptying schoolbags – I went to the SDLP to protest – it stopped".

For other women, moving to a new school, a challenging experience for children in any circumstances, was made even more difficult during the troubles. One woman recalled: "We moved house and I changed school. Kids picked on me asking were we Protestants or Catholics". This was an experience shared by other women, even at primary school level, where one woman remembered "being asked which side you were on". Children's religion was easily identified by school uniforms, and this was a cause of worry raised by mothers from both Catholic and Protestant communities.

Performing at school also presented an additional challenge. One woman said: "I did my exams in the early '80s and did well despite the mayhem all around", but others found school work disrupted. Another woman recalled that she "could not do any homework because we had to keep the light out at night time, and I had to do lines because my homework wasn't done". One woman from a Catholic group remembered breaking out of school to join a protest: "I couldn't understand why Margaret Thatcher could let the Hunger Strikers die...There was a huge protest organised all over the North and so...we made our escape from secondary school because the teachers had warned us not to go. I was 15 and they even locked the doors. We got out to protest and I felt I was contributing".

Given the difficulties faced by children, one woman from a Catholic group who had been a teacher observed: "I was amazed at the resilience of the children I taught".

1.5 Play

For many women, the events of the Troubles and the climate of fear it created meant restrictions for them as children. One woman put it simply: "There was no freedom for children". Whether rural or urban, Protestant or Catholic, women shared memories of the limitations placed on their childhood activities. One woman from an urban Catholic group recalled that "at the beginning, my mother tried to keep myself and my sisters and brothers away from the Troubles. She kept us inside and we played cards, darts and board games". A woman from an urban Protestant group described how her usual routine of family visits was disrupted by violence: "In the '70s I used to go and stay with my sister and her family. At night there was a lot of gunfire, which would frighten us. They lived a few streets from an army base and police station which was always being shot at. I was out playing one afternoon when they bombed the army base. It was the first time I was so close to a bomb. I never went back to stay there again". A woman from a rural group summed up the lasting impact of disruptions to their childhood play and exploration. Her memory was this: "No more blackberries. It became dangerous to play or walk in the fields for fear of booby traps. It was the end of childhood innocence".

1.6 Teenage years

Women's memories of their teenage years too were often of fear and restriction. While this was an issue raised across all groups, there were marginally more recollections of restrictions from women in Protestant groups. One woman from an urban Protestant group recalled: "I remember trouble starting when I was 12/13 years old – fear was the one thing I remember. Nowhere to go for social outings. Teenage years not normal". Many women from all backgrounds recalled the restrictions placed on them as teenagers, with warnings from parents "to stay away from certain pubs". One woman recalled being "very annoyed – couldn't get out when / where I wanted to because of the situation". Another described feeling "Scared, confused and angry".

Not surprisingly, some women had treated these restrictions with some contempt, breaking the rules in order to accommodate a social life. One woman admitted that as a teenager she had been "deceitful – I lied about where I was going so my parents wouldn't worry about me". Another had "chased boys, went to places I shouldn't".

For one rural Protestant woman, one local event, targeted specifically at young people of her peer group, stood out in her mind: "One of the most vivid memories of the '70s is when a group of young people from my youth club were shot at after the club one Friday night. The pattern was that after the club closed, some of us would walk down to the local 'chippy', stand about, eat and chat, then go home. I didn't go that night. As the group stood there, laughing and eating, a car came by and shot at the young people randomly inflicting death and serious injury. I was probably around 14 at the time and was horrified at the sight of young life being snuffed out so brutally and for no reason". In such a climate, parents of teenagers were naturally concerned. One woman recalled: "My mum was petrified for me as I was staying with an aunt and uncle the night Stevensons was burned down. She thought I was in the middle of it and came to get me, bringing my brother who was then arrested".

Despite the events which were going on all around, many women still managed to have fun in their teenage years. One woman remembered "going out socialising with my sister" and another, "going out in the '70s – great craic". One woman remembered the musical culture of the late '70s: "It was a time of punk rock and rebellion and I felt this in secondary school which I attended due to missing the 11+ by 1 point".

Nonetheless, given women's recollections of childhood, one woman's comment could speak for many: "I'm glad my children didn't have the same childhood as me".

2. Motherhood

Many women who participated in this project traced a trajectory through childhood and youth at the beginning of the Troubles, through marriage and motherhood, and for some, grandmotherhood and great-grandmotherhood. While the specific focus of women's worries and fears as mothers occasionally differed slightly, overall, the sentiments expressed by rural and urban and Protestant and Catholic women as mothers across the past four decades shared many similarities.

2.1 Hardship and poverty

Many women stated their position as mothers very simply: "the children came first". The central priority for most was "to keep children safe and happy", "to keep my children safe and educated", "to keep my kids safe and fed". This was the case across groups from all backgrounds.

For many women, keeping the children fed and watered was a struggle. Some found themselves single-parenting, due to the death or absence of a partner due to imprisonment or work. One woman recalled "looking after the children and trying to keep the family together after their Daddy died". While some women from Protestant groups found themselves in this situation, it was mostly women from Catholic groups who had recollections of fulfilling the role of both parents due to the imprisonment of a partner. Another woman felt that she had been "mother and father to the children – I just got on with it – it affected my mental health at a later date". Other women spoke of "being mummy and daddy" while partners were working away or in jail.

For some women, this meant finding themselves in the position of sole breadwinner. Some women mentioned "financial worries" and another recalled "wondering where the next meal was coming from". One woman from a Protestant group recalled: "I provided for the kids, I kept working as my husband couldn't". This was not an isolated occurrence. Many women spoke of hard times. For some, the '60s and '70s were characterised by poverty and bad housing. The struggle to make ends meet was a theme common to groups of all backgrounds, but was particularly mentioned by urban women.

There was no doubt that for women across all groups, one event in particular added to the normal demands of keeping a family "fed and watered". This was the Ulster Workers' Council Strike of 1974, and the hardships it caused were raised by women from all areas, particularly urban groups. Women from urban Catholic areas recalled "sharing food" with neighbours in order to get by. The lack of electricity or gas caused great anxiety for women with young children and babies. One rural woman reflected on the impact of the Strike: "I gave birth to my children in the '70s. Times were difficult – milk was scarce and food was hard to get. The Workers' Strike caused a lot of hardships to families everywhere. I remember queuing for bread, and farmers bringing milk to house which we were grateful for". A woman from an urban group recalled: "My second daughter was born in 1974. I had no gas, no electric, no coal. My husband had to go to the country to get coal".

In one group, there were memories of "going to jumble sales to make ends meet". The mixed group summarised the balancing act of managing a limited budget as follows: "Women coped financially by smuggling across the border, Credit Unions, Provident, the Tallyman and loan sharks, Indian door-to-door salesmen. Money was tight – glad of the EU butter and tins of steak, tick books, the never-never, all women in the same boat, HP, paying up, selling Vanda make-up, robbing Peter to pay Paul, creative accounting – nobody had money to pay for things".

A woman from the mixed group captures a sense of the constant challenge of maintaining an income: "I lost my job in the mid '80s after 23 years, and against all the odds I got another job...In the '90s I lost my job again and had to live on £52 a week for 2 years. Then I got the pension and joined this group and the world opened up for me". In another group, one woman felt that the pressure on women "to feed their kids" forced them towards crime. Another woman described herself as "mother to 12 children, I had a lot to cope with, went to work and took care of my own mother in her home. Helped out with all the children as best I could, never closed the door on any of them, always wanted to be there for them no matter what happened".

2.2 Worry

If there is one word which captures what it was like to be a mother in Northern Ireland from the 1960s onwards, feedback from the groups participating in this project suggest that it is "worry". This was a common thread through feedback from all groups. Women spoke of "not feeling in control", and "not knowing what was happening from one day to the next".

Broadly speaking, this worry revolved around the wellbeing and safety of children. For many, the time of greatest stress was when children were out, particularly as teenagers. One woman summed up the fears of many: "I worried when my son was out – would he come back safe and sound?" Another was "frightened for kids going out after dark – couldn't visit friends in other neighbourhoods". Women dealt as far as they could with these worries by "always telling the kids to watch where they were going", "praying" and trying to "ensure children's safety – taking them to and bringing them back from events". Another women, on the first news of any trouble "went looking for kids to keep them safe", and another recalled "always needing to know where the children were". One woman's solution was simply "to keep kids in at night".

Many women worried about taking small children shopping, with some women recalling the impact of proximity to bombs on their young children. One woman's story was typical: "I remember the bomb at the forensic lab – my son shook with the noise of it and started crying". For many women, protecting children through bombings and shootings was a regular occurrence.

Some women spoke of the impact of being a mother in this atmosphere of tension and worry. One woman described herself as "a bundle of nerves – I had the kids as bad as myself". Another spoke of what she thought could be the long term impact of stress and worry: "In the '90s I took ill with nerves worrying about my family. My daughter talked me into going to women's centre to meet other women in the same boat. I became diabetic with heart trouble and asthma". There is further discussion of the impact of stress and worry on physical and mental health when women discuss issues affecting them today.

2.2.1 Sons

While women of course worried about the wellbeing of daughters, a considerable proportion of the anxiety women expressed was focused on their sons. Many women from Catholic groups spoke of working to "steer them away from trouble". One woman from a rural Catholic group remembered "advising children to keep out of trouble but harassment from security forces led boys to get involved in the troubles". Women from Protestant groups were more inclined to use the word "paramilitaries" as the focus of their anxiety, with many sharing the sentiments of this woman: "It was difficult to stop children from getting involved in paramilitaries – my son was beaten up because he refused to join". One woman spoke of "working hard at looking after my children / grandchildren to keep them out of the troubles". The fear of recruitment by paramilitaries was for these women a real concern.

2.3 Protective Measures

At the same time as many women were trying to steer their offspring away from the conflict, many also recalled trying to "shield children from things that were happening". This was an experience common to women from rural and urban, and Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. For some, this meant avoiding the truth in conversations with their children. One woman from a Protestant group recalled: "trying to hide the truth from the kids about what was happening when vans / cars and granny's house got burnt out". Another said: "I kept my children in the dark – made up my own reasons for the events that happened – they were not yet teenagers". For many women, this was about protecting their children from frightening details, and for others, it was a matter of security. Women married to members of the security forces recalled telling their children not to discuss their father's job outside the home. One woman remembered "explaining to children without saying too much about their uncle and what he was involved in – hoping they would not tell all at school or to someone you didn't want them to for example at the shop". Other women said little to their children in the hope of "letting them form their own opinions". One woman had sent her son away to be educated, believing he would be safer away from home.



Session 1 workshop

2.4 Pain and Tragedy

For some women, their greatest worries were realised, in the form of painful and often tragic circumstances. Women from groups of all backgrounds had lost sons and sons-in-law as a result of the Troubles, particularly as the result of shootings. One woman from a Protestant group described her "worry for my son when he was held at gunpoint at the age of 15. I believe it changed him in later life – he was very quiet and withdrawn". A woman from an urban Catholic group recalled "looking after my daughter as her husband was shot before the baby was born. I took her home, and cared for her and the baby".

3. Marriage and Partnership

3.1 A good team

For some women, marriage was a source of happiness and support. One woman recalled meeting her husband in 1965, describing it as "first love". Another woman remarked: "We are a good team" and another: "My husband gives me good family support". Another woman felt that she and her husband "had to stick together and support each other". Women from both Protestant and Catholic communities considered that they had a role to play in keeping their husbands out of trouble: "I kept advising my husband not to get involved", and another: "I kept him right". As this implies, while many women fully supported their husbands, not all married couples shared the same political views.

Some women remembered “difference of opinions” with their partners, and one recalled that she and her husband had “different views but respected each other’s views”. Another remembered “the odd argument about different reactions to happenings, but supported each other”. One woman found that her husband was much less opinionated than she was herself: “Despite harassment in earlier times, he was not on one side or the other like me!” she said. One woman felt that she had managed the tensions by “keeping communicating with my husband about the difficulties we came through as a family”.

3.2 Lack of support and domestic violence

For other women, however, it was less easy to manage the tensions which life in a conflicted society brought to the marital relationship. Some women spoke of the stress and strain on relationships, often resulting in broken marriages. One woman recalled the “extra work on relationship with husband, working through stress and anxiety to keep any signs of marital strain from the children”. For others, there was more than a high level of tension: “My husband gave me mental torture and no support” said one woman. Another used the term “domestic violence” to describe what she had experienced. Some women spoke of a feeling of lack of support from their husbands, and feelings of isolation and powerlessness as their men got increasingly involved in conflict-related activities. As one woman put it: “Some men drank and got involved politically or were vigilantes playing their part – women felt isolated”. Another woman’s view was that “women felt used and abused”.

3.3 Security forces wives

Many women from Protestant areas, both rural and urban, described the worry they felt for husbands who were in the security forces. One woman recalled: “I had to check the car for bombs because of my husband’s job. Had to look after children and see that they didn’t get hurt in the car. My sons helped me check the car”. Another woman whose husband was in the security forces remembered “checking the car daily for bombs” and added: “We had to be careful where we went - security was always in your mind”. Another woman’s husband was “in the army air-fleet, predominantly in South Armagh, and was shot at regularly”, and another was a senior explosives officer. She “worried about being made a target and blown up”. For other women, it was not their husband’s job that caused concern, but their place of work. One woman from a Protestant group had often been “worried about hubby as he worked in a Catholic area”. Another was “frightened for my hubby during explosions as he worked with gas”.

3.4 Paramilitary impact

Women from Catholic areas too experienced fear for their husbands’ “safety and life”. One woman recalled that her “husband’s life had been threatened by the marines, and the house raided”. For some Catholic women, their marriages were punctuated (and disrupted) by their husband’s terms in prison. One woman recalled her husband’s imprisonment and its impact on their marriage: “In the early days, my husband was shot and in jail. Then he escaped and was on the run, I remember the house being raided. In the ‘90s husband was back in prison – I was rearing three children on own – very hard times. My brother was also in jail and my cousin. My marriage never got started”. Another recalled: “In the ‘70s I was under a lot of pressure trying to raise six children while my husband was on the run and the house was raided every day looking for him”.

For some women, from urban Catholic groups in particular, married life consisted of “visiting Long Kesh week after week”, “finding money for food parcels”, and “smuggling letters”. Many women stated these memories as simply the facts of their marriage in a conflict situation. Some, however, expressed a degree of resentment about the situation they found themselves in. One woman spoke of feeling “angry that I had to visit jail for 5 years”. Another described feeling “hurt because other things that partners were doing were ‘more important’”. Some women described feeling lonely when husbands were away.

For some women from Protestant groups, it was their partner’s involvement in organisations such as the UVF which had caused them anxiety. One woman recalled that “the UVF had a strong hold on my partner”. Another woman’s husband had been threatened by both the IRA and UDA, and a later partner had been imprisoned for involvement in the UVF. One woman’s partner had been “beaten badly by paramilitaries over drugs”.

Many women from Protestant backgrounds, regardless of their husband’s jobs, reported worry in relation to their husband’s going to and coming from work. One woman summed up the feelings of many: “I worried constantly about husband – so many men shot in their car after doing a hard days work. The mental strain was awful – I could only settle after he arrived home”. Another was “concerned all the time about husband coming and going to and from work”. For some women, the worry became a reality, and one woman from a Protestant group recalling “caring for my husband after he got shot. He should have been dead as the gun jammed. He lost his business as he was self-employed. We had money worries and health worries”.

3.5 Making sacrifices

While many women clearly made sacrifices for their husbands, some husbands made sacrifices for their wives too. One woman’s husband “lost his job for marrying a Catholic”, and another’s “husband came from the Republic, this caused problems for the in-laws, initially”. One woman recalled: “I went out with a Catholic – his mother wrote me a letter to say I was not welcome because I was a Protestant”.

3.6 Role reversal: women taking control

Perhaps because a significant number of women from Catholic communities had found themselves managing alone due to the imprisonment of partners, many described a transformation in their lives which had occurred as a result. One woman recalled “controlling the money for the first time”, and another, “having sole responsibility for making decisions”. More than one woman described “starting to feel independent”, and another recalled: “We realised we were strong and started to feel in control”. One woman described the transformation as women “taking on male roles”. Women from both rural and urban Protestant groups had experiences of “becoming the breadwinner” for a range of reasons. One woman’s husband had been made redundant. She recalled: “He never worked again. I went back to full-time education to get qualifications for the workplace. Became the breadwinner”. Another woman faced the same challenge “because my husband couldn’t be relied on”. However, although women from Protestant groups have much to report on the strength of their community development and women’s activities in later years, when speaking of the marriage relationship, there was a greater tendency for women in Catholic groups, and particularly for wives of prisoners who had found themselves coping alone, to talk about the move towards a newfound independence and control.

4. Work

4.1 Finding a job

Some women, particularly Catholics, mentioned the difficulty of finding work. One woman had “left school with qualifications but because of religion did not get a decent job”. Another failed to get a job she had applied for and remembered that her father “not a political person, told me it was because of my religion”. One woman from the mixed group referred to a practice which was common in the ‘50s and ‘60s and which was sometimes a way of bypassing discrimination: “A friend spoke for me and got me a job in the factory”.

5.2 Checkpoints, roadblocks, riots, protests

Army checkpoints and roadblocks caused delays in getting around for most women, although women from Catholic groups were more likely to mention being stopped and searched by the security forces. One woman from a rural Catholic group recounted an experience which was not unusual: "I was going to collect the children from the bus, leaving dinner on the gas cooker, thinking I was going to be five minutes. Instead I was stopped by the army and kept an hour. I didn't leave the dinner on cooker anymore after that". Another rural woman recalled "leaving children to school in my nightdress, and being stopped by the army and taken out on the road in my nightgown". A woman from an urban Catholic group remembered: "I was stopped in the town to get searched at a barricade. A woman soldier took a little string bag I had with a sucking bottle in it – I caused a right racket that day".

A particularly stressful impact of traffic disruption was recalled by a number of women, both Protestant and Catholic: getting to hospital. One woman from a rural Protestant group had the following experience: "We tried for hours to get to Montgomery House to see my sister-in-law who was dying of cancer – this was the '60s. A bomb had closed shops and streets in Royal Avenue. No matter how we tried to get through it was impossible. Luckily we got to a bus which took us to the hospice". Another had a childhood memory of the impact of such disruption: "I remember trying to get to the Royal Hospital with my mum and two brothers, and being told to lie down on the floor because there were riots – people throwing stones and barricading the roads". A woman from a Protestant group described the anxiety that such uncertainty could bring: "I remember coming back from hospital in Donegal with my daughter, lying in the back of the car. She had had an operation three days earlier. One of the Hunger Strikers was being buried and vast crowds of people had gathered. I was frightened that a riot would break out and that her stitches would burst". Whether visiting sick relatives, or going for ante-natal check-ups, many women had experienced difficulty in getting to hospital.

Cross-border traffic was also an issue. One woman recalled a particularly trying situation for her family: "I lived over the border in the '70s. My uncle died in Belfast. No undertaker wanted to cross the border to collect his remains. Police took him to the border and we took him to Galway".

5.3 Shopping: searches and bombs

The number of women who described disruption to shopping was striking, perhaps because shopping is an activity traditionally associated with women. This comparatively mundane activity, carried out either as part of the daily chores or for pleasure, became for many a challenge to be negotiated on a daily basis. When women talked about shopping, whether rural or urban, Protestant or Catholic, their stories tended to focus on Belfast city centre in particular, and Derry to a lesser degree.

A large number of women recalled body searches and handbag searches when entering shops as a particularly intrusive experience. The sense of intrusion was captured by one woman who remembered going shopping in Belfast and being searched: "My mother's friend was with us and 'beeped' outside of Marks and Spencers. She had to disclose that she had a contraceptive device". Women from all groups tended to avoid the word "hate" in their feedback, no matter what the issue. However, when women spoke about the body searches and handbag searches that had become part and parcel of shopping in Belfast, the word "hate" appeared more than once, and from both Protestant and Catholic groups: "I remember hating the personal body searches that were carried out in Belfast" said one woman, and another: "I hated going into town because you got searched every shop you went into".

Equally, many recalled being caught up in bombs or bomb scares. One woman had been shopping when "bombs started going off in town – you were afraid to bring children with you in case you did not get out

of the way in time". This was a common experience across all groups, presumably because for those who would venture there, Belfast was the main shopping centre. Many women recalled "being caught in the town with my children when several bombs went off". As a result, many women spoke of not taking the children with them on shopping trips, as it was too unsafe. One woman recalled investing in a "designer Italian buggy so we could make a quick getaway if there was trouble – the pram was too cumbersome". Another woman spoke of "second guessing" which day would be a good day to go into town, when there might be less likelihood of a bomb. For one woman, a particular family incident of the 1980s stood out: "We had taken the children to see Santa's grotto in the Castle Court centre. There was an alarm which indicated immediate evacuation. Standing outside, in front of Castle Court, we heard a massive bang – Santa's grotto had been blown up. I remember standing in the street, crying and thinking 'how sad, how terrible'".

5.4 Socialising

For women from all backgrounds, disruptions to transport and mobility also posed challenges for their social and community activities. One woman remembered the challenge of simply attending classes and meetings: "I became involved in adult education and this led to me becoming involved in a women's group. I had great difficulty in going about from A to B to attend meetings. Looking back I don't know how we did it". Other women observed the impact of such limitations on the social lives of communities: "We were confined to a specific area – stuck – therefore social clubs started. This caused separateness". A woman from a Catholic group recalled "going south for nights out".

6. Emotional Impact and Coping

Many women spoke of the emotional impact of life in a conflicted society. Words such as "stress" and "tension" were common across all groups. Other women spoke of feeling "angry", "resentful" and "scared". A small number of women spoke of experiencing "hate". Others spoke of feeling sad for families who had lost loved ones, and "relief that yours was OK". Some spoke of feelings of "guilt" and even "feeling selfish when something bad happened and it wasn't to your family". Some women who had found themselves alone due to the death or imprisonment of husbands felt "isolated" and "lonely"; as one woman put it: "we had to fend for ourselves". One woman observed that in the '70s and '80s "things started to take a strain on people especially women because they had to cope with keeping the home going". One woman recalled "no 'me' time", and others, "lots of sleepless nights". Whether worrying about husbands working for the security forces, involved in paramilitary organisations, or simply worrying about the whole family, the language used by women suggests a heavy psychological burden. While a strong sense of resilience emerges from women's responses, it is also clear that there was an emotional cost to coping daily with the uncertainties and in some cases, trauma, of living in a conflicted society. It is difficult to draw distinctions between the responses of women in rural or urban or Protestant or Catholic groups. The themes which follow were repeated across groups from all backgrounds.

6.1 Just getting on with it

Across all groups there were women who felt that they had coped by "just getting on with it". As one woman put it: "We managed like robots – what else could you do?". Another woman said: "Women coped by getting on with life, rearing children, working, cooking, knitting, washing". Some saw the need to "get on with it" as a feature of women's lives, regardless of the Troubles: "Women had to multi-task, no matter what involvement in the troubles, they had to carry on with family life". Another felt that the pressures on women's lives were not much different than they might be in normal times: "Women have always had their troubles, housing, children, work, money worries".

6.2 Keeping things normal

For many women, the answer was “trying to keep things normal”. It was a strategy shared by women from all backgrounds. Women spoke of “trying to keep to a normal routine”, and “trying to live life as normal as possible”. Alongside this, however, was a sense that the Troubles “became normal”. As one woman put it: “Day by day the troubles with all its sights and sounds became normal”.

6.3 Blanking it out

Perhaps connected to the strategy of keeping life as normal as possible was the response, again common across groups of all backgrounds, that many women “ignored” or “tuned out” of what was going on. A woman from a rural Protestant group recalled “putting things to the back of your mind”, a woman from an urban Catholic group talked about “blanking out the heartbreak”. One woman spoke of “existing – going through the motions”, and another recalled “always wishing you were somewhere else”.

6.4 Finding a different focus

Some women coped by focusing their attention on things other than the conflict. For many, this was “working and rearing children”. As one woman put it: “I concentrated on the family, tried not to think of what was going on around me”. Another found comfort in “cuddling the children”. For some, it was their children who kept them functioning: “I reared my children, devoted myself to them, my children kept me sane”. Other women found distraction in “daydreams” and “reading”.

For some, simply keeping busy, “going to work” and “getting out of the home” helped them to cope. One woman felt that “work helped give release as well as provide money”. For another, work was one of the few places where “women mixed – the troubles weren’t the focus”.

“Women coped by getting on with life, rearing children, working, cooking, knitting, washing”.

6.5 “Say nothing”

Silence was mentioned by women across groups of all backgrounds as a coping mechanism. For some women, keeping silence was a choice, based on security. Women recalled being “careful what you said and who you said it to”, and “having to keep things secret”. One woman from a Catholic group recalled: “I kept quiet – did not voice opinion in front of children or men – didn’t want to force opinion on children or encourage them”. However, some women kept silence through fear. One woman recalled: “I was afraid to talk about the troubles” and another: “I daren’t speak out against it during power cuts or rationings”.

6.6 Practical measures

Across all groups, there was a sense that one coped by taking practical measures to deal with the situation. Women from urban Protestant groups spoke of the practicalities of dealing with the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike: “Queuing for rations of butter, sugar and milk”, and “stocking up on essentials for power cuts – candles, stoves, coal” were mentioned. Women in rural Catholic areas talked about “building in time to journeys – allowing for road blocks and diversions”.

6.7 Protective measures

For many women, there were practical measures that contributed to feelings of security. Women spoke of putting their energies into “protecting the family”. A woman from an urban Protestant group recalled: “First priority, family and safety – making sure you knew where the kids were and when they would be back”. A woman from a rural Catholic group remembered “briefing the children before a night out”. For some women the solution was to educate their children. As one woman put it: “I focused on educating the children – encouraging further education and for them to move away from the Troubles”. The solution for one woman was “moving to a safer area”. For others, keeping informed of what was going on was essential. As one woman put it: “I listened to the radio and news bulletins and learned to be alert at all times”.

Women in Protestant groups in particular tended to mention “staying in your own area” as a protective measure. As one rural woman put it: “You contained yourself and your family to a certain area, kept an eye on the comings and goings in your street and knew who the strangers were”. Another spoke of “sussing people out – asked questions to gauge if they were a threat”. One woman from a rural Protestant group felt that “segregation – keeping separate”, as well as an outcome of the Troubles, was also a kind of protective coping mechanism. In a rural Protestant group, one woman suggested that “retaliation” could also be considered as a means of coping, while in an urban Catholic group, it was suggested that “becoming an activist” was a form of coping.

6.8 Religion and Prayer

Women from all groups mentioned finding comfort in their religion. One woman felt that things were “in God’s hands – I had a deep faith”. Another spoke of the year she was “born again” as a great comfort in her life. For many women “praying” helped them to cope. For others, getting involved in the church helped. Two women from Catholic groups reported going on a spiritual retreat, from which they drew great strength. However, while for some women the Church was a haven, for others, its role during the Troubles was a “disappointment”.

6.9 Medication

A substantial number of women, across all groups, rural and urban, Protestant and Catholic, raised the subject of medication as a coping mechanism. A woman from a rural Protestant group recalled "going to the doctor – got tranquillisers". Women from rural and urban groups referred to the use of anti-depressants, and the mixed group gave a summary of the various interventions they had been exposed to: "medication, anti-depressants, diazepam, sleeping pills 'a wee roche', mandrax". In one urban Catholic group, almost every participant had been on (or was still on) medication of some kind. One woman recalled being "put on medication – used as a guinea-pig. Suffered a lot of depression and anxiety".

6.10 Alcohol

Across groups of all backgrounds, women suggested that alcohol had been used by some as a coping mechanism. Some individual women stated that they had suffered from alcoholism. Some women had "started to drink" at crisis points in their lives, and the "off-licence" had become the solution.

6.11 Professional support

A comparatively small number of women reported that they had sought or been offered professional support. A woman from an urban Protestant group had "attended stress management classes". A woman from an urban Catholic group recalled "attending the funny farm".

6.12 Laugh or Cry?

Women from rural, urban, Protestant, Catholic and mixed groups raised "humour" and "laughter" as "a good medicine" and an important coping strategy. However, a small number of women felt that they coped by crying: one woman remembered "often being caught crying unaware".

6.13 Resilience

Women spoke with great frankness about how they coped throughout the Troubles, with many adopting a combination of the methods outlined above. There was a sense of resilience and survival from many. A woman in an urban Catholic group considered that "we are not victims but survivors now". That said, many women recognised that they had coped only "with great difficulty", and many felt that they were still dealing with the impact of the conflict, years after it had officially come to an end. As one woman put it: "I don't know how we coped".

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The Impact on Communities

SECTION TWO

The Impact on Communities

7. Communities: "Hard times but good neighbours"

There were many memories shared by women from all backgrounds with regard to the impact of the Troubles on their communities and on the streets where they lived.

Women in all groups recalled a strong sense of community spirit throughout the conflict, with memories of people supporting each other in difficult times. Women spoke of "helping people who were burned out", "helping during curfew", "looking out for each other" and even "putting yourself at risk in helping others". A woman in a rural Catholic group had recollections of "a load of pensioners evacuated from their houses sitting inside and outside our house whilst we made them cups of tea". This story is typical of others from women across many of the groups. One group reflected fondly on a local woman's shop, which was "essential for serving the community (she opened one night for one of the women who was getting notions for Quencher lollies!)". In a Catholic group, one woman recalled "leaving the front door open in case anyone needed help". In a rural area, it was felt to be a "good farming community" which had held people together. One Catholic group talked about a sense of "cultural revival" during the conflict.

There were also memories of positive community spirit in the Protestant community. While women looked back on the circumstances in which people's lives were being disturbed and disrupted with horror or disbelief, they also cherished the memories of the more positive aspects of the situation: "good neighbours", and a sense of "camaraderie". Women from Protestant groups, and in particular urban groups, recalled street parties to celebrate a range of events, and also bonfires, and one woman recalled the "first good park for the community (1980s), first community mural". In one case, community spirit had manifested itself in a strange and humorous way. One woman recalled "a car being stolen for barricades, then given back when they were finished with it".

Most specifically, when women reflected on community spirit, many of their memories were of women supporting each other. Women from all areas spoke of this kind of community "togetherness" and support for neighbours becoming increasingly formalised, with women becoming involved in community groups and establishing women's groups. The way in which informal support between women gradually evolved into group activity will be dealt with in more detail later.

However, the positive view of community life and spirit was not unanimously held. Across many groups, there were individual women who lamented the fact that for years there was "no social life and no community life" in their areas. One Protestant group spoke of their community "closing ranks" as a means of self-preservation during the Troubles. Some women in rural groups, particularly those in Protestant areas, spoke of feelings of "isolation" and "insularity".

7.1 The Security Forces

The presence of the army in local areas was a recurrent theme for both rural and urban groups. Many women recalled soldiers patrolling the streets, and one rural group talked about the fear of "soldiers being in a hyper state – very reactionary – sometimes under the influence of alcohol". Women in Catholic groups also spoke of problems with the "policing of funerals, no respect for burials, not being able to get to bodies", and the "constant goading, jibing and riling by security forces". One woman recalled how the mention of Castlereagh Police Station made her feel: "Hearing someone was being taken there sent shivers down you". Not surprisingly, the word "fear" crops up in many accounts. One woman described her feelings at the beginning of the conflict: "I was very afraid of what was happening in the '60s / '70s. Would not go out. Dog kicked nearly to death by Brits out the back". There were also many mentions of police roadblocks, and army checkpoints and searches.

7.2 Internment

Many communities were affected by the introduction of internment¹ without trial in 1971. Women in Catholic groups in particular were more likely to recall men from their communities being "lifted" during internment, including family members. While one woman from a Protestant group had a relative interned, it was mainly Catholic women who had memories of sons, fathers and brothers being interned. Stories of the impact of internment, and imprisonment in general, follow throughout subsequent sections.

7.3 Trouble on the streets

Urban groups, both Catholic and Protestant, recalled ongoing violence in the community, and the arrival of the "B" Specials² was noted by both. Although not exclusive to urban groups, women from urban groups, both Protestant and Catholic, were more likely to recall curfews, barricades, and burned out cars and buses in their streets, particularly during the late '60s, '70s and '80s. Women from Protestant areas in particular mentioned vigilante activity, with "men taking turns doing vigilante duty" at barricades. Women in urban areas, both Protestant and Catholic, had more memories of rioting, "being hit by teargas", and rubber and plastic bullets. Women from a Catholic group recalled "the use of water and vinegar for washing the eyes" following the use of CS gas to disperse riots in their community. A woman from a Protestant group recalled: "I saw police fire plastic bullets down my street and aim at anybody".

Knee-cappings, punishment beatings and drive-by shootings were mentioned more often, but not exclusively, by urban groups. Women from Protestant areas specifically mentioned painted kerbs, and cars set alight and barricades at the time of the Drumcree protests³. Tension around the rerouting of bands in the '90s and bands prevented from crossing the Ormeau Bridge was also mentioned. Some Protestant women bemoaned government inactivity in the face of so much trouble.

Rural areas also had their share of trouble on the streets, and women from rural Catholic groups for example recalled upheaval in the form of riots and protests around the introduction of internment, the Hunger Strikes, and other key events.

One woman spoke of an experience whereby a time of great upheaval in her community coincided with a painful time for her family: "In 1981 my father was dying of cancer and it was around the time when Bobby Sands was dying and the people were banging binlids outside our door. I remember I had to go out our door and ask them to move. They apologised and went somewhere else".

7.4 Paramilitary activity

Women from all backgrounds mentioned aspects of paramilitary activity in local areas. However, there was generally a greater emphasis on the presence of paramilitaries from women in Protestant groups, and these women were also more likely to use the term "paramilitary" to describe violent, intimidatory, criminal and controlling behaviour in local areas. While women in Catholic groups both rural and urban referred to events in their local communities which might fit this description, including killings, they tended not to use the word "paramilitary" to describe it. Women in an urban Protestant group recalled paramilitaries "training in the local park" in the '80s. A woman in another Protestant group remembered "bodies being dumped everywhere" in the '70s, and another woman mentioned the "fear of paramilitaries and beatings". There was a sense from women in Protestant groups, and in particular rural groups, that paramilitaries had gained (and continued to gain) an increasing foothold. Feuds and infighting amongst paramilitaries were seen as a continuing threat to community safety despite the Peace Process, with some women referring for example to "a blood bath between local bars due to a feud between paramilitaries". Some women felt that their involvement in community and women's organisations was seen as a threat to paramilitaries, and some stated that they had been threatened as a result. The issue of paramilitary violence and its ongoing impact on community safety is also raised in Section 14.2.

7.5 Segregation

Although many women reflected positively on the way that communities pulled together, many also spoke of increasing segregation and division, with communities being split and neighbours of the other religion moving away to other areas. A small number of women from rural Protestant groups in particular recalled a "heightened awareness of Catholic and Protestant" in the 1970s, and the lack of socialisation with the other side. One woman from a rural Protestant group who had begun life in Belfast remembered the way that her community had changed and her family's subsequent decision to move house: "Every July there would be cars taken and burnt out, we wouldn't go out after dark. There were bomb scares, soldiers searched the house. People put out black flags. The estate was now 99% Roman Catholic. We were Protestants. NO-ONE intimidated us but we decided to move to another town. Our new street was mixed. We had street parties, stayed within our own area, kept our head down". With limited cross-community contact, one woman spoke of having to "meet friends from a different community in neutral areas".

For other women, their experiences were more acute. Women in both Protestant and Catholic groups had stories about direct intimidation which caused them to leave their homes. A number of women from urban Catholic groups recalled either being "burnt out" of their homes, or friends and family being burnt out. One woman from a Catholic group described leaving her house "due to enquiries being made by UDA and UVF". For women in both Protestant and Catholic communities, people "being burnt out of their houses" was a common memory of the '60s and '70s in particular. However, some women from rural Protestant groups had experiences of being forced to leave their homes during recent years. Often, whole families were impacted by these developments. A woman from a rural Protestant group recalled: "Mum got her bungalow burnt down for flying Union Jack (1990s). Put out of estate I lived in for 20 years. Called 'Huns' and so on".

Some women noted that it was not just “the other side” who forced people out of their houses. One Protestant woman who had lived in an urban area recalled “our first flat, the UDA tried to put me out and someone else in”. She spoke of the presence of “the UDA parading around the streets”, and described the vigilantes in the area where she lived as “very cheeky people”. Women spoke of the creation of ghettos which resulted from increased segregation. In an urban Protestant group, there was a feeling that “good neighbours were put out by ‘our crowd’”. The insinuation was that such actions did not represent the desires of the whole community.

Many women spoke with sadness of broken friendships and communities divided. Community division in Derry had clearly caused great sadness to women from the mixed group. As one woman put it: “I lost friends as the city divided, ghettos formed as the troubles intensified”. One woman remembered “leaving my home in the city due to the Troubles and moving from the Derry side to the Waterside”. Another recalled her own feelings at the increasing segregation in Derry: “I remember moving home to new areas, sadness at loss of contact with old friends and neighbours. Derry divided, it broke people apart”.

8. Community Activism

Not surprisingly, given that most women participated in this project as members of women’s groups, many women’s activism took the form of establishing or joining organisations and activities aimed at serving the local community, whether children, young people, or women. For some, however, their activism was more overtly political, and ranged from participation in protests to joining paramilitary organisations.

8.1 Women from Catholic groups

8.1.1 Marches and protests

At the beginning of the Troubles, some women, predominantly from Catholic groups, recalled participation in Civil Rights marches such as, for example, the march from Coalisland to Dungannon in 1968. That said, a woman from a Protestant group recalled her concern at her father’s involvement in the movement. Another woman from a Protestant group remembered “watching the Civil Rights movement being stopped at Burntollet Bridge and the ensuing brutality and riots that came later”.

For some women from Catholic groups, collective action and protest was a way of life: “I was constantly at demonstrations, rosaries, etc. in the 1970s. The children were herded in the car”, said one woman from a rural group. For another, protest and resistance absorbed her life and that of her family: “I was never off the road, demonstrating, electioneering, visiting jails. Conversation was very much on the one topic. I never missed a news report. A very stressed time as all my family was in prison”. A small number of women from both Catholic and Protestant groups recalled being involved in blocking roads. Some women in urban Catholic areas recalled helping to build barricades, and banging binlids on the ground, as a warning to the community that an army raid was imminent. One woman from an urban Catholic referred to these women as “the Duck Squads”. Women in a rural Catholic group suggested that they had their “own language code within communities” when dealing with issues relating to the conflict.

8.1.2 Supporting the Hunger Strikes

The Hunger Strikes were a central focus for memories, particularly although not exclusively in rural Catholic groups, with one group recalling events around the arrest and death of a local man, Martin Hurson⁴, as a result of the Hunger Strike. Women remembered “meetings, marches and prayer groups for the local



Writing a Community Events Timeline

Hunger Striker”, “saying a decade of the rosary for local Hunger Striker who died”, and another “making tea at wake of local Hunger Striker”. Women in urban Catholic groups shared similar memories: “Women got on the streets for the Hunger Strikers - out each night praying for them in the hope things would get better. The British government just let them die so young - sad”.

One woman saw her first opportunity to vote as a form of activism: “I was the eldest in the family and so first to vote and first to get wages. The first time I voted was for Bobby Sands”. Another worked in the election campaign: “I remember listening to the news of a local Hunger Striker dying. I worked at the elections. Bobby Sands was elected. I still remember Patterson giving the results”.

8.1.3 Direct political activism

A very small proportion of women reported direct participation in political parties, and those few were women from nationalist backgrounds, who had joined Sinn Féin.

Still fewer women reported direct involvement in paramilitary activity, although it is unclear whether this suggests a low level of direct political activism by women, or a disinclination to report such activism. One woman described her trajectory as follows: “In the ‘60s I joined first Sinn Féin Cumann in the area and then IRA. In the ‘70s brother was arrested and jailed – moved materials. I was involved in recruitment. My friend was killed. I got married and had children. Fear for family – just Sinn Féin now. Army and police major hassle throughout South Armagh. H-Block committee mobilised a lot of people”.

An urban woman said: "I had a lot to do with the Prisoners' Defence Fund and the Republican News, selling it every week, and I let my house get used to hide gear and bombs". Another spoke of providing "safe houses – taking risks" to help.

8.1.4 Suspected of Activism

A small number of women who did not say that they had been involved in paramilitary activities had found themselves nonetheless suspected of such activity. One woman recalled being "very frightened when held by the SAS". Others recalled "a night in a police cell", "being held for hours", and another felt that she had been the victim of mistaken identity: "My sister and I were lifted in the town by the Brits and held for 6 hours, they said I bombed a local shop because I fitted the description".

8.2 Women from Protestant groups

Women in Protestant groups reported a more limited degree of political activism. One woman recalled "going to Derry with Paisley" and his entourage at the beginning of the Troubles. Another had sold badges for the Peace People. One woman recalled "hiding guns". However, overall there were more detailed recollections of direct involvement in political activism from women in Catholic groups, both rural and urban. Broadly speaking, when Protestant women mentioned protest and activism, they tended to indicate that they were conscious that it was going on, rather than describing participation in it. For example, women from all groups referred to the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) strike of 1974⁵. Many remembered having to queue for bread, butter and meat, with one Protestant woman describing it as "more like the '30s than the '70s". One woman remembered "being in a shop when the Shipyard workers downed tools and walked en masse through Belfast in protest and the Stormont government was suspended. Direct Rule from Westminster". Some women from Protestant groups mentioned the United Unionist Action Council (UUAC) strike⁶, and "women's protests as a show of solidarity". Others referred to the Drumcree protest by Orangemen in 1994, with one woman remembering "the M1 closed as a result". The "Ulster Says NO" campaign was also mentioned.

Towards the 1990s, there is much more similarity between Catholic and Protestant groups in terms of political activity with a "small p", with feedback suggesting high levels of community and women's developmental activity across all groups.

8.3 Enforced Activism

There were a small number of references, from both Protestant and Catholic women, to being forced into undertaking activities which they did not want to do. One woman recalled: "Three Scottish soldiers killed ('70s). I was told to go out and stand at barricades. My friend was shot dead". Another group recalled women having to smuggle guns in prams in the 1970s, which they did not want to do.

9. Violence and Loss

9.1 Headline events of the decades

While women from all backgrounds tended to recall major headline events of the conflict such as Bloody Sunday⁷, the Shankill Butchers⁸, the Enniskillen bomb⁹ and the Omagh bomb¹⁰, groups also recalled the events which were broadly targeted at, or directly impacted on their own communities.

In addition to the above, Catholic groups mentioned events such as the Springhill massacre¹¹, the Hunger Strikes¹², the killing of the Gibraltar 3¹³, the Greysteel murders¹⁴, the sectarian murder of the three young brothers in their home¹⁵, and the Drumcree standoff. A woman from a rural Catholic group said: "I remember my father watching Bloody Sunday on TV and swearing. I remember being shocked that an RTE presenter used the word 'bloody' – it was deemed to be a swearword".

Most Protestant groups mentioned Bloody Friday¹⁶, with one woman recalling: "We were in Carrickfergus Castle when we heard the bombs going off in Oxford Street on Bloody Friday". Also mentioned were the abduction of a mother of ten by the IRA¹⁷, the La Mon House Hotel bomb¹⁸, the soldiers murdered at Casement¹⁹, the killing of Lord Mountbatten²⁰, the Narrow Water bombs²¹, the Shankill Road bomb²², and the Forensic Laboratory bomb²³.

That said, there was no absolute rule to which events groups remembered, or how they responded to them. Women in Protestant groups mentioned events such as Bloody Sunday and the Hunger Strikes as significant. Women in Catholic groups mentioned events such as the Enniskillen bomb and the killing of Lord Mountbatten as significant.

9.2 Up close: personal experiences of violence

In many groups, urban and rural, Protestant and Catholic, there were women whose lives had been directly affected by violence, in terms of the loss of family or friends. Their accounts were personal and painful. However, even those who had not lost family members recalled a level of violence, tension and intimidation ongoing in their communities on a regular and sometimes daily basis. Not surprisingly, it was personal and local events – the Troubles as it impacted on the home, the family, and the local community – which featured most in the women's accounts. In a report of this kind, it is of course not possible to detail every woman's experiences. However, this section aims, with respect to all participants, to give an overview of the nature of the violence and loss which women had to bear during the conflict.

9.3 Urban women

9.3.1 Urban Catholic women

The accounts of women in urban Catholic groups included the loss of family members and friends. One woman described an event which had a lasting impact on the whole family: "My sister was shot at her own doorstep in her mother's arms ('70s). She was aged 24 years. She died on Mother's Day after the cease fire and left behind an 18-month old child. I had my baby a few months later. My mother came to live with me after my father died. She still lives with me today age 96, after what she came through – a great woman". Another woman recalled: "My daughter got married. Her husband was shot dead before her first baby was born - a bad time we had with her getting over it". Another woman had "two brothers shot - one during a feud and the other a sectarian attack". One woman's story showed the painful intersection of tragedy related to the conflict with equally devastating personal events: "My first child was only born when my sister-in-law was blown up. She was a beautiful person, we were trying to get on with life when the love of my life my father was murdered. We moved in with my mother as she could not cope. Neither could I but I had to be brave for my mother. Life went slowly on when my uncle was killed. I just wanted to die – what more can a family take? From 1975 'til now I lost 5 children. Everything I loved was taken away from us. I took a breakdown. I moved house, best move ever. I fell pregnant with my son...He is now a healthy adult thank God".

Women in all groups recalled a strong sense of community spirit throughout the conflict, with memories of people supporting each other in difficult times.

One woman's story illustrates the ongoing effect of close proximity to bomb blasts: "I suffered trauma and depression due to my young son being badly injured in a bomb explosion on a train in the 1970s. I had permanent nerve damage to hearing in right ear due to bomb explosion in the Tax Office and car bomb explosion in the Donegal Road. Nerve damage due to GPO and other big bomb explosions as I worked in city centre and constantly had to evacuate building".

Even when incidents did not involve family members, the memories were nonetheless sharp and painful. One woman recalled helping a young boy in the '70s: "I brought a child of 14 into my house as he was getting chased by the Brits. I told him to sit until they passed. I gave him a cup of tea, then he wanted to go home. Five minutes later he was shot dead by the army for carrying a stone". Another woman remembered: "My work place was burnt down during rioting and the boy I worked with was shot dead. I was very shocked and saddened by it and have never forgotten him".

9.3.2 Urban Protestant women

Women in urban Protestant groups also reported a high level of proximity to the Troubles, and significant levels of tension and fear in their communities. Many lost family members and friends through shootings and bombings. One woman recalled a series of events which befell her family in the '70s: I met my husband in the early '70s. My sister's work was burned down. The place next door to my work was bombed out. I married in the mid-'70s and moved away to England. My cousin was shot. I had a child. My aunt was injured in a bomb blast. My cousin's husband was shot dead". One woman spoke of the impact on her family and friends: "Uncle shot and cousin shot (both by snipers). Had my second child. Friends blown up by enemies. Some by their own stupidity. Some arrested and interned". Another woman recalled: "A man was shot dead outside our house in the late '70s". Women remembered "the murder of two local shopkeepers", "the indiscriminate murder of Catholics", and "a boy burned to death by his own petrol bomb".

Women who had been married to members of the security forces shared memories such as "having to check the car for bombs" before putting the children in for the school run in the morning.

Many Protestant women spoke of experiences of proximity to bombs. One woman recalled being "inside Jennymount Mill when the bomb went off". One woman expressed how violence changed things in her life: "By 1969 I had my last son and the Troubles started – he used to hide behind the settee and to this day would not listen to the news. In the '70s a bomb blew up a nearby pub. We were shocked for a little while. Then I moved to a new house. A bomb blew up a telephone box. My daughter took a fit of the shakes with the shock, it was a long time to get her settled...In the '80s I was out in the town when the bomb went off in the Europa Hotel – I was lucky I was further down the road but it still frightened me".

9.4 Rural women

9.4.1 Rural Catholic women

Rural areas were by no means exempt from the Troubles, with many accounts from rural women about catastrophic events in their lives and communities. Where traumatic events happened in a small local community, those events tended to appear in the recollections of almost every group member. For women in a rural Catholic group, the Loughgall shootings of 1987²⁴ were a real and present memory. One woman recalled: "four local boys died in the Loughgall shooting – it was so devastating, I lost my son". Another woman reported "times were bad, a lot of anger, eldest son and friend arrested. Loughgall shootings, four more neighbours murdered". One woman described her painful personal experience of another shooting: "I was at a play with mum that night – I got a phone call to say to go to hospital. I was told my son was dead along with three others – my children were devastated, everyone was in shock". For this woman, the situation remained unresolved: "I tried to get justice but never did – still feel we deserved the truth". As a result of this event, other women spoke of the nervousness in the community afterwards. Not surprisingly, one woman remembered "checking the TV news to see who was shot dead the night before". Another spoke of her "fear of sectarian shootings".

One rural woman described her "worry about the kids as the IRA left lorries in the park". Another woman spoke of "a neighbour and his friend blown up by their own bomb".

For rural Catholic groups, conflict with the security forces was an ongoing source of community tension. Women spoke of "the security forces terrorizing the community", the "fear of abuse to the family during house raids" and "teenage boys being victimised". One rural Catholic group spoke of "belongings destroyed", "houses wrecked" and "doors kicked in". Some women referred to the use of their area as "an army training ground", and border gun battles. Collusion between the security forces and loyalists was raised as a feature of the Troubles, with many seeing local shootings as the outcome of this policy. One woman saw the killing of a pregnant woman "killed beside her four little boys" as a further outcome of this policy. The use of informants was also raised. Women from both rural and urban areas spoke of the British "shoot-to-kill" policy, with a rural group recalling "the murder of a local man by the British army". One woman recalled an attack on the SAS in a local village in the 1980s.

9.4.2 Rural Protestant women

Women in rural Protestant communities had also directly experienced the impact of violence in their lives and families. For many, the violence they had experienced had often occurred outside of their rural areas, during periods when they had lived in or visited Belfast. Some spoke of incendiary devices, and trying to get out of Belfast having been caught in bomb scares. For others, the violence was local.

Another woman described the events surrounding the death of her cousin who was "tortured and shot in the head when I was a teenager. He was 19. His mother was Protestant and his father was Catholic. They lived in a nationalist area. His girlfriend was from a Protestant area. Loyalist paramilitaries thought he was giving information to the nationalist areas and so sanctioned his death. No-one was ever caught or charged with his murder". One woman's son had been murdered in the conflict between the UDA and the UVF.

Another woman who had lived in England in the '70s had returned to Northern Ireland in the '80s, only to be exposed to a litany of violent acts: "I was caught in a bomb in Belfast city centre. I saw an old person get their leg blown off. I was hijacked in the Falls Rd. I had a relative blown up. My sister-in-law took a nervous breakdown. I had to look after her children...I saw a man shot. Moved house due to harassment". One woman spoke of "snipers shooting innocent soldiers and bystanders" in the community. Even as the Peace Process gained momentum, families continued to experience violence and trauma. One woman recalled: "In the late '90s my son and sister got held up at gunpoint - sister got her car stolen which was used in a shooting of a Catholic". Another woman's husband "got shot ('90s) in tit for tat shootings. He lost his business through this as he was recovering mentally and physically".

Some rural Protestant women described events in their communities which contributed to tensions and fear. A UVF leader had been shot, another was injured in a car bomb. For one woman, one event in particular stood out in her mind: "The first time a woman was shot by paramilitaries was in our community". Women in rural Protestant groups also recalled tit-for-tat shootings, incendiary devices, and trying to get out of Belfast having been caught in bomb scares.

10. Emigration: leaving the community

10.1 Reasons for leaving

In many groups, women had personal experiences of emigration from Ireland to other parts of the world in search of a better life, and to escape the violence and tension at home. Overall, there tended to be more stories of emigration from Protestant than from Catholic groups. A woman from an urban Protestant group "left the country due to concerns about the impact of the troubles on my young children". Others left for the security of their families, having married into the military. A woman from a Catholic group had "made a decision to send my son to England to be educated after the Hunger Strikes", and another spoke of moving away as a means of "trying to protect family to have a normal life".

Many women who had not moved away themselves had family members who emigrated. One woman recalled that "at the first sight of trouble in 1969 my sister and her family got on the boat to Liverpool and never came back for 14 years". Another woman's sister had moved to England because of a mixed-religion marriage. Other women spoke of brothers and sisters who had gone to live in Scotland and Australia.

10.2 Reasons for returning

Clearly, given their involvement in this project, all participants who had emigrated had returned home. There were many reasons given for this. Many spoke of the constant worry about friends and family at home, even when they themselves felt comparatively safe in their new country of choice. One woman from a rural Protestant group had a story that was fairly typical: "We decided to emigrate to Canada in the '80s to escape the Troubles and have better family life. I was constantly concerned for those back home. Returned to NI following the Peace Process, hoping things would be better. I was surprised that even despite 15 years away from the Troubles, the fear in my mind came back very quickly, for example if a car backfired I crouched down thinking it was a gunshot".

A woman from another Protestant group had gone to live in the Channel Isles, but "still heard about people being shot in our street". A woman from a rural Catholic group had been living in England in the '60s, but was "worried about family at home. Came home in '70s. They tried to bomb our shop".

Other women returned due to homesickness. One woman had "moved to Australia. I took my two children with me, I thought I would give them a better life but we could not settle there because we were so homesick. We came back to Ireland. We missed my family and friends too much to stay". A woman from an urban group recalled "Because I married into the British forces I had to leave my home town with my two children. We went to live in Dublin - completely different lifestyle, different people, different dialect, we were regarded with suspicion. Had to evacuate the hospital there because of a bomb alert. I came back home in the '80s. So glad to be home and met all my friends and made new ones".

Some women returned despite or perhaps because of the serious nature of the situation back home. One woman from a Protestant group recalled: "My sister's work was burned down. The place next to my work was bombed out. I married in the mid-'70s and moved away to England. My cousin was shot and I had my daughter. My aunt was injured in a bomb blast and my cousin's husband was shot dead. I lived in Germany for a couple of years in the '80s, my marriage broke down so then I came home".

10.3 A hostile reception

England was a common destination for many women who had emigrated. For some, their identity attracted insults and hostility from many quarters. One woman from a rural Protestant group had difficult memories: "I applied to join the military. I moved to England - couldn't face the hostility of Belfast. I hated being asked where I came from - used to say Antrim instead of Belfast... I worked in the medical end of the forces. I was asked by a medical officer to hand him a piece of equipment - he said 'it looks like a petrol bomb'. Humiliation - ignorance. I was asked questions like 'what's your religion, proddie or mick?' and told I was 'too sensitive' and not to take it 'personally'."

Another woman reported equally difficult experiences of life in England: "I married an English man and lived in England in the '60s. I was called names and told to go back home by people in the streets". Another rural Protestant woman had gone to work in London and Europe "to escape the everyday carnage. I was always made to feel like a criminal at airports because of my identity and accent - I was ashamed of my identity, the countless bombs and killings on both sides. I was always nervous of cars backfiring even abroad". Another woman described a kind of polite discomfort about her identity in her English place of work: "people stopped talking when I came in - they didn't want to offend me".

10.4 A positive experience

Some women reported positive experiences of emigration. One woman from a rural Catholic group had been in London in the '90s and "made lots of friends from all walks of life and travelled and broadened my horizons. I became more confident in myself not feeling like a second class citizen in my own country, very proud to be Irish". Another woman had "applied to civil service in London in '60s" and "loved it". However, events at home still had a pull on people. This woman continued: "Bloody Sunday happened. Someone I knew had a family member involved - I was horrified at what was happening in my own country. I returned home in the '70s".

Another woman left Northern Ireland and moved to England, Malta and then Africa "where on TV I was surprised to see British Tanks going up the Shankill". She returned to Belfast in '69, and continues: "Then we went to Scotland, but always returned to Belfast and came back for good at beginning of '90s. In the '80s I travelled North and South (of Ireland) with my sister and we were always treated very well. My sister died. I joined a local group for ladies of my age and they have been really good and helped me through a sad time - may our friendship continue".

10.5 Getting away from it all – holidays

For many women looking back over the decades, particularly women from Protestant groups, a key event of the '70s or '80s was their "first foreign holiday", or "first holiday on a plane". One woman remembered going to Marbella for her first foreign holiday "and went every year for 30 years". One woman recalled that "in the '80s we had a caravan by the seaside – it was great to get away from Belfast at weekends for a break". One woman who had moved to Scotland for a short time in the '70s and returned, always looked forward to "getting away to Scotland again" for breaks. Another woman "visited friends down south who could not come North".

While holidays provided a welcome escape, some women found that their identity remained a fraught issue. Even remarks not directly intended to offend were difficult to bear. A woman from a rural Catholic group had been on holiday in America shortly after September 11: "I remember an American lady thanking us for coming – and commenting that coming from Northern Ireland we were used to this sort of thing"

11. Women Coming Together: Beginning to Organize

11.1 Taking control in the home

Many women commented on how taking on unfamiliar roles helped them to gain some control over their lives. There was an increasing sense of independence, and a recognition of their own abilities. While more women from Catholic than Protestant communities reported this initial sense of taking control, when women talked about their involvement, there was a similar level of activity and community organisation reported by women from both Catholic and Protestant groups. Given that all participants were women involved in women's groups, this is perhaps not surprising.

11.2 Return to education

Many felt that they had coped by taking control of their own lives and returning to education, whether as part of a women's group, or at another establishment. A woman from an urban Catholic group had found that her involvement in women's education had helped her cope with tragic circumstances in her life: "I lost three sons and my husband. I took up courses with a local voluntary organisation to help me cope". One woman from a rural Catholic group observed: "I have returned to education as during the past decades I feel I was everything to everybody and had no time to think about me". One woman from a rural Protestant community who had returned to study out of necessity had a more difficult experience: "In the '80s my husband was made redundant. I went back to education studying IT. I started work, learned to drive. My boys went to university and left home. Sometimes I didn't get back from work until 9pm because of bomb scares. Once or twice I had to stay in Belfast all night. I started drinking in the house, eventually became an alcoholic but still continued working. I became a full-time carer for my husband and mother. Joined AA. Got sober".

For most, however, a renewed relationship with education meant positive changes in their lives, and took them in new directions, urban or rural, Catholic or Protestant. One woman recalled: "I went and did a course in Jordanstown in IT and Management. I worked on Peace I Projects and cross-border projects". Another recalled: "In the early '80s I did the foundation course at Magee. I did an HNC in computers. I took redundancy in the mid '90s and became involved in community work. I did the Certificate in Women's Studies at Magee".

11.3 Mutual support

Mutual support from families and within communities was central to coping. Women recalled "camaraderie" and "friendship" and "family support" helping them to pull through. For many women, this specifically took the form of women supporting each other. According to one woman: "Women supported each other with money and childcare". Another recalled that: "Women helped each other with jobs - if women were sick, others worked their shifts". Another woman recalled "relying on good neighbours for health care, personal care, and safety".

Common to groups of all backgrounds was a sense of this kind of informal neighbourly support eventually becoming more formalised during the '70s. Whether urban Protestant or rural Catholic, many women recalled a sense of "community spirit" and an increasing focus on organised community activities. Women from both communities spoke of organising events such as bus-runs for young people, and women from Protestant areas recalled holding street parties to celebrate events such as the wedding of Charles and Diana, and the Queen's jubilee, "to try to bring some fun to the community". Another recalled "collecting from the community in the '70s to open the local Community Centre (2 shillings a week)." Another shared this memory, and added: "We collected until we got £1000. We started a darts team and pensioners' club".



When women spoke about community development activities like this in the '70s, there was a sense of communities developing themselves separately, with little contact with the "other side". A woman from an urban Catholic group felt that "looking after our own communities" was a priority. A woman from an urban Protestant group made a similar observation, talking about the importance of "making provision for our communities".

11.4 Working to improve the community

The move from informal mutual support towards more organised community activities continued in the '80s. One woman from an urban Protestant community remembered the establishment of a local community forum in her area in this period. A woman from an urban Catholic area recalled: "trying to cope with all that was going on in our community by helping out with looking after children – started up a playgroup in the area". A woman from a rural Catholic area recalled: "In the '80s I entered paid community work. I was resentful of how my community and area were demonised around the world". A number of women from all backgrounds had become involved in some way in activities geared towards the betterment of their communities. Some women from rural Catholic groups mentioned the GAA, particularly its youth activities as a "lifesaver" in their communities, with projects directed at both boys and girls. One woman felt that the Troubles had been particularly bad in her community in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a worsening drug problem had developed. She had become involved in community activities and recalled the recent impact of getting involved with an inspirational community leader. Another woman recalled: "In the '90s I went back to school and got my GCSE English and Maths. Drugs in our estate. I got involved in community work. We started up the women's group, got involved with cross-community women's project".

A small number of women from Protestant groups also recalled joining local bands, and becoming involved in international organisations like the International Voluntary Service (IVS).

11.5 Cross-community activities

Throughout the '80s and '90s, more women reported increasing involvement in cross-community activities. One woman had begun by "starting a youth club in the cityside with my husband. I got a prestigious award for services to youth, and started a new cross-community development post". The mixed group who participated in the project continue to proceed on a cross-community journey and have undertaken a range of activities together. A woman from a rural Protestant group recalled attending "reconciliation meetings". For another woman from an urban Protestant area, the trajectory was less straightforward: "In the '80s my attitude started to change. I did more cross-community work and started to see and understand the government was wrong and did not handle things well. I had a breakdown and ended up in hospital". Other women became involved in groups such as Victim Support, and the "We Too Have Suffered" group. Others had participated in projects such as a cross-community trip to Washington.

11.6 Women's development

Alongside wider community development activities, comments from a woman from a rural Protestant group, and a woman from an urban Catholic group, gave a sense of the beginnings of the formalisation of women's development in particular. The former recalled: "women supporting each other, wanting to talk", the latter recalled "women starting to come together to support each other". One woman remembered that one impetus for women's groups in her area was that in her Protestant estate, there were "only men's clubs, nothing for women". There was considerable confluence between the recollections of urban and rural, and Protestant and Catholic groups about how it all began. A woman from a rural Protestant group recalled "trying to get women to talk, women getting together in the '80s".

A woman from an urban Catholic group remembered "in the '70s we got together all the women to see what we could all do to help each other". Women both urban and rural shared recollections such as "women becoming more socially aware and getting together", and "women setting up self-help groups".

11.7 Women's groups

One woman from an urban Protestant group saw the 1970s as the embryonic stage of their local women's centre, establishing the first after-schools mother and toddler group in the area, which was "later to become the women's centre". Some women from rural Catholic groups spoke of joining the local women's group in the 1980s. However it is clear from the numbers of women, Catholic and Protestant and rural and urban, who date their first involvement in women's groups to the 1990s, that there was a comparative flourishing of groups and provision for women in this decade. One woman from an urban group recalled: "In the '90s the Women's Centre opened. The library opened, and everyone was to bring a book". Another felt that the Women's Centre had brought significant improvements to the local area: "Women got a voice. First traffic survey, first ramps, women fighting for change, renovating older houses in area with funding".

While women from all backgrounds and most groups mentioned some involvement in cross-community activity, women in urban Protestant groups tended to say more about women's groups as a focus for this kind of work. One woman from an urban Protestant community remembered "working on the peaceline in the '90s. Women came to the centre from both sides". Another woman's encounter with women from different communities had led her to choose to work in the "other community": "I joined the Women's Centre. Divorced. First decent paid job. Started to meet women from different communities. Now working in other community on placement through choice".

Women who introduced cross-community aspects to their work could find themselves, however, in controversial situations. One group in a Protestant area found themselves under attack following a visit from the Irish president in the late '90s. One woman recalled the experience: "workers were attacked and some had to move out of the area as a result. The ethos of the area has now changed for the better. Partnership – all working together and starting to see the benefits".

It was clear from the feedback of many women, rural and urban and Protestant and Catholic, that the women's groups and organisations that had grown out of informal support were a lifeline. One rural woman recalled coping by "escaping to the women's group – learning new things, personal development, health, confidence building". For another rural woman, the women's group brought relief as it was "not political, and had no hidden agenda". Another woman from a mixed group spoke of the benefits she had derived after the death of her husband: "I started a new life. Joined groups, met some new friends, went places and did things I would never have dreamt of. Am looking forward to every day now knowing what's in store but hoping it will be enjoyable". Another woman described the trajectory of her life from factory worker and cleaner to finding a new lease of life taking courses in the local women's centre: "A friend spoke for me and got me a job in the factory ('60s). I moved to my first flat and had 5 children ('70s). In the '80s I moved to my first house and had two more children. I took cleaning jobs. My parents died. I started going to courses in the '90s. I never lived until now as I was busy having children". Another woman described "taking up painting and photography - I have opened up a new chapter in the book".

12. "Normal" Life

While it is evident that a great number of women in Northern Ireland have been exposed to hardship, disruption, anxiety and, in many cases, violence and bereavement over the last forty years, it is also important to remember that their personal stories included moments of joy, fun, laughter and accomplishment. One group in particular were very keen not to be defined by the Troubles, but rather to give attention to the great variety of experiences, good and bad, conflict-related and not, which made up their lives.

12.1 The stages of life

A woman from an urban Catholic group captured a sense of the upheaval which many young women must have experienced in the transition from daughter of one household, to wife in another: "I got married in the '70s and moved out of my family home. It was a shock to my system to be a wife, work out and run a home". Another woman traced the trajectory of the events of normal life: "I went through school, Sunday school every Sunday. Went to dances, got married, had first child. Moved into new house and had the rest of my children. By the '90s they had grown up and gone to university. My father died".

For most women, their moments of greatest joy were the births of their children. Many women listed the dates of birth of their children alongside the dates of traumatic and painful events in their lives. Others spoke of the pleasure their grandchildren had brought to their lives. One woman spoke of how her children, as well as finding God, had brought great joy to her life: "I had three lovely babies in the '60s, and I love them with all my heart. In the '70s the three of them were married and I have 7 grandchildren all doing well. In the '80s I got 3 great-grandchildren. In the 1990s I was born again – praise the Lord."

Women of all backgrounds had nursed sick parents and husbands through illnesses, and many had seen parents and husband die. One woman said: "My husband got cancer and died in 1997 the year Princess Diana died". Another recalled her life through the lens of changing times: "In the '60s you couldn't get married in white if you were pregnant. Most Catholics went to Dublin for honeymoon. Had wedding breakfast. Dana won the Eurovision. First three children born. Went to England. In the '70s the money changed, I had more children. I started drinking. In the '80s I started work after 20 years looking after children. '90s, my husband died, change of life, had an angina attack".

12.2 Having fun

Many women had memories of childhood fun and games. One woman recalled "going for walks, playing with hoops, playing knick-knock on doors with all my friends". In the same group, there were reminiscences about "going for walks, picnics, having a piece and jam, window shopping, walking around with girl friends, innocent pursuits, fashion, vanity, flower power, music, the Bay City Rollers".

A woman from a rural Protestant group "went out to dance halls in the '70s. Dated soldiers and other people. Got free butter and stewed steak – generally a happy time listening to music". Another recalled "going out with soldiers, drinking, smoking, drugs". Some women had particular memories of Top of the Pops, the Bay City Rollers and ABBA. For older women, going out to Bingo was a typical pleasure.

12.3 Traces of the Conflict

However, while many recalled a whole range of "normal" life experiences, it was difficult to find any woman's story in which some aspect of life in a conflicted society did not feature.



Conference participants

Often, the daily joys and tragedies of life were reported alongside memories of turmoil and disruption. A woman from an urban Catholic group remembered: "We lost our home and had to live in the school - it was terrible. In the '70s my first girl was married and she was beautiful. I am still happily married myself". A woman from the mixed group recalled "dances, Civil Rights marches, boyfriends and mini-skirts", all in the same sentence. Another remembered "the Bay City Rollers, worked in the factory, started nursing and going to dances. Bomb damage sales". Another looked back fondly on "long hot summers going to beach with family", but recalled at the same time of her life "the house being raided by the army and playing in the local reservoir". One completes the story of the very normal trajectory of her life with the recollection of a major bomb in the area: "I used to walk to the next door neighbour's for water – lived in a thatched cottage with no electric or inside toilet ('60s). Got caned at school every day. In the '70s I took children to gather sticks, we put them in prams, the children had to walk. Also gathered blackberries. In the '80s I passed my driving test. In the '90s there was a bomb at Coshquin, it killed 5 soldiers".

Women in Northern Ireland played, had fun, grew up, got married, had children, worked hard to rear them, supported sisters, friends and neighbours, enjoyed each other's company, nursed parents and family members through illness, and attended the funerals of friends and family members, as might be expected. But out of the considerable number of women who participated in this project, it was difficult to identify more than a handful whose day-to-day life had not intersected in some way with the realities of the Troubles, whether in the form of direct impact or loss, or in the form of constant anxiety and disruption to the mundane activities of everyday life.

Issues

SECTION THREE

Today

Issues Today

13. Before the Agreement: A Complex Peace

Following talks about peace which had been ongoing both formally and informally since the 1980s, the Agreement, often referred to as the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, was finally signed in 1998. While the majority of women across rural and urban and Catholic and Protestant groups spoke with optimism and support about the Peace Process, the '90s was by no means a peaceful decade for many women, with many recalling painful and traumatic incidents both leading up to the Agreement, and after it. One woman said: "They declared the first ceasefire after my brother got shot (Royal Irish Regiment)". Another considered that "the Troubles were worse in the '90s. Always living in fear. Moved out of Belfast to escape. Lived in a new development which was great – we supported each other and organised events in our own community. An incendiary device was put in my husband's car due to his job. The car went on fire. Bomb disposal squad called. After that I wanted to leave Northern Ireland". For one woman whose family had had no involvement in activism of any kind, the 1990s brought a new challenge: "My brother-in-law's brother was shot by the police and left to die. It had a big effect on my opinion of the RUC. Maybe I just became less naïve".

The overwhelming sense from many was of a weariness with conflict, and a desire for peace, but there was also the sense that it was for some women a complex and incomplete peace.

13.1 The Peace Process

For many, the Agreement was a key feature of their recollections of the '90s, with some mentioning specifically the reinstatement of the Stormont Assembly. Some women associated the Peace Process with "fewer killings", others with the "decommissioning of weapons", and "recovering the bodies of the disappeared". Women from different communities spoke of "praying for peace", and women from all backgrounds expressed feelings such as "relief and hope" at developments.

For a large number of women, that hope was focused on their children and grandchildren's future. A woman from an urban Catholic group said: "I'm glad war is over for my children and grandchildren". A woman from an urban Protestant group expressed her feelings as a prayer: "Thank the Lord every night to keep us all safe. We must have a good peaceful future all over the world for our children". A woman from a rural Catholic group summed up her optimism: "I am married now with two boys and I'm glad they will never experience the job and housing inequality – feeling positive about the future".

Other women were able to see improvements in their own lives. A woman from a rural Catholic group reflected: "No more raids. Returned to education. Children went to college. Life improved". Another said: "In the '90s, my Protestant friend refused to speak to me. It was a relief to see the Peace Process come. It left people more relaxed about the situation. A woman from an urban Protestant group recalled: "The 1990s brought a lot of talk of peace. Then the Good Friday Agreement. From then on movement to what and where we are today. With hope it never goes back". Another recalled "the first signs of deals being done and people talking. Was not hopeful at start knowing what we all had been through. Happy we have peace".

13.2 Conflict within communities

While many women expressed optimism at the prospect of lasting peace, others remarked on the capacity for conflict in various forms to continue despite what was happening in the wider political context. Most of these women did not so much express a lack of support for the Peace Process as a concern that it was not an unequivocal and universal peace. This was particularly clear for communities which had experienced violent events in the recent past.

13.3 Catholic communities

Women from a rural Catholic group spoke of the complexity of living in a more peaceful time while at the same time dealing with a local situation which challenged the community's understanding of what "peace" actually meant. One woman also captured the complexity of the situation: "The army lookout post was taken down but people had become so used to it they took no notice. There was no big celebration – the press could not understand. We got our life back...then current difficulties as the result of a local murder". Another said: "In the '90s I felt positive for the first time in a long time. Kept praying peace would come and stay. Everyone much happier and worried about different things. Then a local boy was slaughtered – are we any better – no law and order". For a woman from an urban Catholic group, the Peace Process meant "people still getting killed, still bigotry, prisoners being released".

13.4 Protestant communities

For some women from Protestant groups too, ongoing events in their local communities made it difficult for them to speak optimistically about peace. This was particularly the case for women from rural Protestant communities, although issues were raised, although to a lesser degree, by women from urban Protestant groups. While there had clearly been trouble in some Catholic communities, as noted earlier, women in Protestant groups were more likely to attribute current difficulties to paramilitaries when discussing local problems and conflicts. Broadly speaking, when describing the local situation in the '90s and '00s, the issue of paramilitary control, violence, and intimidation was raised more explicitly by Protestant than by Catholic groups.

One woman recounted a litany of intimidation and disruption in recent times: "My windows were put through 15 times in one week. My ma's car was burnt out on three different occasions. I started to attend WAVE which helped children in the Troubles. During this time my ma was depressed and stressed – we all felt scared and lonely.

Had to move houses a couple of times". Another woman said: "I remember, in the '70s, feeling protected by paramilitaries. In the '90s I was burnt out of my home because of working with mixed community – I felt very vulnerable. Don't feel any loyalty to paramilitaries now – don't feel protected". Another woman echoed this sentiment "Paramilitaries still control area – dictators NOT protectors". When paramilitaries were mentioned, they were sometimes associated in women's reflections with "drugs" and "drugs money". One woman summed up the impact of paramilitary activity in her community: "I fear for male relatives joining paramilitary organisations. I have witnessed paramilitary feuding, hijacking of cars, lorries, people's lifeline – burning down of local shops and buildings...They still run our lives and communities – though they proclaim to be the 'godfather' figure in society they (paramilitary groups) are actually the menace / nuisance in our community". A woman from an urban Catholic community echoed the concerns of many Protestant women: "Then we had the Peace Process. The difference now is that hoods and scumbags have taken over the areas. As a result of these difficulties, some women had begun to attend local organisations for support".

13.5 Headline events

Most women who expressed reservations about the absolute nature of peace referred not to incidents which had directly affected themselves, their families or their local community, but rather to "headline" events which had occurred since the Agreement which had caused them anger or concern. For many women, the Omagh bomb of 1998 was a key event. A woman from a rural Catholic group expressed the depth of her feelings: "The Omagh bombing really was the last straw and the fact that it was 'suspected' to be from South Armagh really made me annoyed. I felt that my silence for so long was at an end and I must be counted". Another described the Omagh bomb as "devastating", and many remembered where they had been when they had heard about it. One woman's memories sums up the complexities of life post-Agreement: "I got married. Good Friday Agreement. Moved to escape conflict in Belfast. Happy days. Omagh bomb. More job prospects. Watched Holy Cross in horror. Had a baby. More integration between both communities. Not all good – some terrible acts still happening".

13.6 Political reservations

For some women, their reservations about the Peace Process were political. A woman from an urban Protestant group spoke of "still doing community work and trying to come to terms with being let down by local politicians", and a woman from an urban Catholic group spoke in similar terms, reporting "disappointment and feeling let down". A woman from a rural Catholic group who had been politically active in the 70s was unsure of the extent to which the Peace Process had been a success: "What is the end result? Is Stormont and British rule different just because we're there? (I don't know). I have my children, all thinking differently, maybe I did something right".

13.7 A supported peace?

Women were not asked directly if they supported the Peace Process or not, and it is inappropriate to second guess levels of support. It is possible, however, to consider what the feedback might broadly indicate. The feedback suggests that many women support and welcome the prospect of peace, and many expressed a sense of relief at already apparent benefits. However, it also suggests that some other women are disappointed with the deals struck and the way that politicians have handled developments. For women experiencing conflict in their own communities, many appear to be not so much against the prospect of peace, as seriously disenchanted with its failure to reach them, or to have a meaningful impact on their communities. One woman talked of the "new troubles" which had come to her area in the shape of paramilitaries. While within this study many women appeared to be upbeat and hopeful for the future of Northern Ireland and their communities and families, a significant number of women appeared to consider peace, at best, incomplete.

14. Issues Concerning Women Today

As well as looking back over their experiences of the last four decades, all groups were given the opportunity to think about the impact of both the Troubles and the Peace Process on policy and public service issues relating to their lives and the lives of their families. In particular, women were asked to consider issues relating to Health, Safety, and Education. Women discussed:

- Issues in Health / Safety / Education during the Troubles
- The extent to which these issues are better / worse / the same now as compared with during the conflict
- New issues which have emerged in Health / Safety / Education.

It is important to point out that this was not a statistical study. The following gives a broad overview of how most women felt about each issue. However, not all issues broadly felt to be better were necessarily unanimously felt to be better, and not all issues felt to be worse were unanimously felt to be worse. Where there was significant disagreement between women as to whether an issue was better or worse post-Peace Process, this is indicated.

In addition, women had the opportunity to identify issues which they felt required urgent attention in Health, Safety and Education, and to outline a campaign which their group could potentially lead on at least one of those issues. At the conference which closed the project, women also discussed potential solutions to the many challenges they identified. Overall, there were many more commonalities than differences between the issues raised by rural and urban, and Protestant and Catholic women.

The overwhelming sense from many was of a weariness with conflict, and a desire for peace, but there was also the sense that it was for some women a complex and incomplete peace.

14.1 Health Issues

14.1.1 Threats to physical wellbeing

There was broad consensus that the “physical danger in everyday life – going to the shops, the school run etc” had improved, and that there were “fewer killings”. However, there was discussion of ongoing knee-cappings and punishment beatings in local communities. While some women felt that these problems had improved to some degree, others felt that they remained an issue. Death and injury through “joyriding” was considered to be a threat to well-being which had existed during the Troubles, and had persisted or even worsened in the present day. It was an issue raised by both rural and urban women.

14.1.2 The impact of conflict on health

Women across all groups mentioned the impact on health and well-being of violent events and the associated tension and stress. Many associated the strain of the conflict with specific health impacts. Some participants felt that there were “lots of Troubles-related deaths not recorded as such (e.g. heart attacks, shock, loss of hope, despair, nothing to live for)”. One group talked about “shock” in particular, and its “delayed effects on the body”, with one woman recalling “losing my voice at a time of trauma”. All women in the group agreed that this was on the whole better, but expressed the view that “shock has stayed in the memory and at certain times still manifests itself”. Some women described the physical toll of conflict-related stress, including conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and palpitations. A significant number of participants related miscarriages to “stress”. One woman recalled: “After the trauma of remarks after Bloody Sunday, I miscarried my baby”. While stress was felt to continue to play a role in miscarriage, there was also a perception that better ante-natal care and access to hospitals had reduced the risk to some degree.

One woman’s account is typical of the kind of connections women make between the Troubles and ill health: “In the ‘60s we were put out of our home and lived in the local school. My brother was shot dead by the British army. My mother took very ill. She died in the ‘70s. I had a very bad nervous breakdown. My father had a stroke, I looked after him. My husband was out of work. I found it very hard to cope with the troubles during troubled times”. A woman in an urban Protestant group suggested a similar connection between violent events, and illness: “My mother was in town in 1972 when a bomb exploded and a few days later suffered her first stroke. Mother was hospitalised in the late seventies for 2 years. I travelled to the Royal through it all, 4-5 times a week. She died in the ‘80s”. Many women found themselves as carers, for whom it was felt that much more support was needed.

Some women felt that there were still deaths today which occurred because of despair, not related to the conflict but due to “sexual abuse, bullying, drugs and alcohol”. Indeed, alcoholism was seen by many groups as a substantial problem, and “another legacy of the Troubles” which had reached “epidemic proportions”. Despite the Peace Process, people continued to experience both physical and mental health problems as the result of the conflict.

14.1.3 Mental health

Mental Health was a recurrent concern in groups of all backgrounds. There was broad agreement that mental health, or as some women put it, “nervous complaints”, were worse now than during the conflict. Women talked about anxiety, depression, “nervous breakdowns”, medication and hospitalisation during the Troubles, and drew a connection between those conditions and the stress and worry of the conflict. One woman spoke of the “constant stress endured from trying to protect the family and being on your own whilst the men were away”. Another spoke of “ethnic cleansing” as a source of both mental and physical pain, although this was felt to have improved.

One participant recalled "acute awareness of the troubles in the neighbourhood – midnight awakenings, depression and anxiety", and continued to experience these feelings, although now "not so much because of the troubles". In one group, the question of "whether the peace is real or not" was a present cause of worry. Among both rural and urban groups, there was a feeling that people were "still suffering as a result of the legacy of the 'Troubles'". Depression and anxiety were considered to be worse now, because "people are still traumatised and have been unable to grieve properly". There were differing views on the issue of "post-traumatic stress", and the extent to which it had improved. Some felt that there was more help available, others that people were still suffering and "didn't get help", turning instead to alcohol and drugs.

There was a perception in most groups that stress not related to the conflict had in fact increased, with troubles-related stress being replaced by different pressures arising from parenting, jobs, money worries, and increasing materialism. "A faster lifestyle" which was too pressured was felt to be the cause of a great deal of mental health problems nowadays. The issue of post-natal depression was raised by some participants, and was felt to have improved to some degree, in that it was more likely to be recognised and treated.

14.1.3 Male mental health

The issue of male mental health arose frequently in these discussions. Many felt that there had been no improvement in male mental health since the conflict. As one woman put it: "No change here – men still do not talk about their problems enough". There was considerable concern across rural and urban, and Catholic and Protestant groups about suicide, with many women feeling that this problem had worsened, especially among young men. Some expressed the view that this was happening now "for different reasons than during the Troubles".

14.1.4 Diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems

There was broad agreement that there was better information on mental health than before, and this was welcomed. However, across rural and urban and Catholic and Protestant groups, there were differing views on the extent to which treatments had improved. Women, particularly in urban areas, spoke of "medications freely prescribed and shared between women" during the Troubles. There was a perception that "everybody was prescribed anti-depressants: the 'blue bomber', paracodal and others", and that repeat prescriptions were easily obtained. While some participants felt that there was better regulation now, easily available repeat prescriptions were still considered to be a problem. Some women considered that the use of anti-depressants had now increased, although they acknowledged that it was possible that "they are more in evidence, maybe because it is more openly discussed than before".

There were also differing views on the availability of counselling support for mental health. Some women felt that there were "more opportunities to get counselling, to get help – it's not ignored". However others felt that despite increased support, services were still inadequate and that more psychologists were needed. In one rural group, there was a feeling that the situation was worse as there was "no system to cope with mental health problems. Increasing information and awareness but treatment still not readily available – long waiting lists".

14.1.5 Hospitals: access and being a patient

Many women mentioned the problems of getting to hospital during the conflict. Those in urban areas described being "unable to get to hospital due to barricades", as well as a "fear of travelling to hospital" if this meant going through areas perceived to be hostile. For rural women, the issue of access was also raised, although often for different reasons.

One rural group discussed the difficulties of contacting hospitals and doctors at a time ('60s and '70s) and in an area where not everyone had a phone. Mobile reception in some areas remained a problem. The availability of ambulances was also an issue for rural groups, a problem which was felt to have worsened. As one group put it: "The main issue is distance from services – not directly related to the troubles". In one rural area, the lack of a local hospital was felt to be a worsening problem, impacting on access to health care.

Some women reflected on the difficulties of going to hospital at a time when they were cautious of which one to go to "because of religion". Some reported a fear of "being in mixed wards", and of "sectarianism in hospitals by doctors". There was a shared sense that these were no longer worries, with one group considering the situation "greatly improved, due to anti-discrimination and equality laws".

That said, there was broad agreement across all groups that hospital care was not as good as it had been, with "concern regarding the state of hospitals and difficulty in getting appointments – you are just a number and age doesn't count". The issue of lower standards of cleanliness in hospital was a recurrent theme across rural and urban, and Protestant and Catholic groups. There was also concern about the closure of some maternity units, making accessibility a problem for some women.

14.1.6 Accessibility of general and local healthcare

The issue of accessibility of general healthcare was also raised repeatedly across many groups, with the consensus being that it was now less accessible. There was a feeling that in the past "doctors had time for you", and many women observed that it was "impossible now to get a home visit from a doctor". Others felt that it was difficult to get an appointment even at the doctor's surgery, with one woman remarking: "now you're just a number – shoved out before you're healed". One urban group expressed concern that difficulties in getting appointments with local surgeries were causing young mothers to have to go to casualty with young children.

Despite a sense that service provision had declined, there was recognition that women's rights in healthcare had improved significantly – one group recalled that in the past "the husband had to be present to sign when a child was given an anaesthetic, and had to agree for woman to be sterilised". Alongside improved rights, women's confidence had also increased, with some women experiencing "more confidence to talk to GP about health issues". It was felt that greater openness meant that people now "talk about cancer more", and that cancer awareness was better. Illnesses such as pneumonia were also considered to have improved.

There was a call for "localised health services that are relevant – providing services in mental health, and healthy living", and for Community Health Education projects in particular to be mainstreamed "before peace funding goes".

14.1.7 Children and teenagers

Children's health issues were raised by most groups. There was broad agreement that many childhood illnesses such as polio, TB, whooping cough, measles, mumps and rubella had been alleviated by vaccination programmes (although some reservations were expressed over the MMR vaccine). Other aspects of children's preventative health measures were felt to have deteriorated, with the cessation of children's medicals in schools, and "no children's nurse calling at homes and schools". The withdrawal of health supplements for children such as cod liver oil, and items such as orange juice and milk at school were also raised. However, one group felt that these programmes had been replaced by the provision of health information to children from the Health Promotion Unit.

Asthma and respiratory conditions in children were a recurrent concern across many groups, rural and urban, and Protestant and Catholic, and were felt to have worsened considerably. Some groups felt that these were caused by environmental factors such as increased traffic and pollution, especially in urban areas. Others felt that stress experienced by mothers was a contributory factor to babies with asthma.

One group raised the fact that during the abnormal situation of the Troubles, "normal childhood concerns like puberty and adolescence went unnoticed or were unimportant", and that this had improved today. Equally, it was felt that in the past, sexual and physical abuse "was largely ignored, especially if men had important roles to play during the Troubles", a situation which had now improved.

Most groups raised the issue of the "ready availability" of illegal drugs as one of the most significant risks to children and young people's health, an issue which women discussed in greater detail when considering the issue of "safety". Sexually transmitted diseases were also considered a threat, as were increasing concerns about body image and weight. It was felt that there was "more pressure on people, especially children, to look a certain way".

One group felt that access to dental care for children and adults had worsened, with dental care simply "too expensive" under the new system.

14.1.8 Preventative measures

There was agreement that measures to prevent or detect serious conditions had improved, with many women mentioning Health MOTs for adults, and in particular, breast and cervical screening for women.

14.1.10 Priority issues

In addition to discussing a range of health issues, all groups had the opportunity to identify issues which they felt required urgent attention – and on which, as a group, they could potentially campaign if they so desired. Each group had different priorities, although there was considerable overlap at times.

Priorities included:

Better hospital services

This included the need for: more staff; improved waiting times; an end to "cutbacks that cost lives"; better elderly care in hospital, and cleaner hospitals.

More funding for improved mental health services

This included the need to focus on stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other stress-related health problems. One group made the connection between "healthy minds and healthy communities".

Better general health services

This included the need for improved access to doctors' appointments including out-of-hours appointments, and reduced waiting time for GP appointments. One group, conscious of the new Health Structures emerging under the Review of Public Administration suggested working to create community awareness of what was happening, aiming to shape the new structures and lobbying the GP for local commissioning. For them, the simplification of services and resources, and the retention of the community health structure was a priority.



CYNTHIA COCKBURN

Health support for young people

One group suggested working with local voluntary organisations and off-licenses on awareness-raising for young people around drugs and alcohol.

Increased asthma awareness

This group felt that increased general awareness was needed, but also support from Ministers and the Health Service for improved environmental conditions.

14.2 Safety Issues

14.2.1 Conflict-related violence

Recalling the decades of the conflict, women talked initially about the direct threat to safety occasioned by acts of violence. Bombs and bomb scares were recurrent themes, as well as the fear of rioting and hijacking. For many women the fear of bombs in particular impacted on the normal business of everyday life. Participants talked about drive-by shootings, people being burnt out of their homes, and the Shankill Butchers. One woman recalled feeling "terrified" a lot of the time. Another spoke of the "fear of passing army patrols or police in case you were shot", and one woman remembered feeling "worried about receiving parcels in the post". All of these direct conflict-related issues were felt to be better today. It was agreed that the absence of house raids made home a safer place. One group remarked that living beside the Peace Line was now a less troubled experience than it had been during the Troubles.

14.2.2 Women's safety

Women from all groups reported that their fear for their own safety had increased since the Troubles. There was a shared perception that rape had increased, and crimes such as muggings including bag-snatching and the theft of mobile phones were felt to be more of a threat now than before. Women spoke of a comparative "lack of freedom" for women today, as compared with during the conflict. Many felt "less safe on nights out due to spiked drinks, date rapes, attacks". One woman felt that it was "unsafe to leave your door unlocked even when you're in the house". Others spoke of a lack of security for women in public spaces. Across groups of all backgrounds women reported feeling "more safe in our own communities at the beginning of the Troubles". One woman spoke for many when she asked the question: "What kind of peace are we going to have?" Another spoke of the need to connect current problems with "the changing role of men" in a post-conflict society.

Some felt that "domestic violence is still brushed under carpet", as it was before. One group considered that domestic violence was "not seen as important" during the Troubles. They felt that there had been a perception that "the 'Boys' will sort it out", which was described as "ironic as paramilitaries were often thumping their own wives". There was no agreement on the extent to which this had improved, if at all. In some groups, there was a perception that there were more incidences of domestic violence, but also a recognition that it was now easier to report.

Many women spoke of the need they had felt to disguise their identity during the Troubles. One group discussed "changing the spelling of your name dependent upon whom you are talking to (e.g. Anne – taking off the 'e')". This was generally perceived to be less of an issue now than it had been in the past with a feeling that this was due to "better government legislation ensuring rights". However, there was also a feeling that in certain situations there was still a fear of disclosing identity. One Catholic group felt that caution should still be exercised when "asking for directions in different area – still wouldn't go into Protestant areas having to watch your pronunciation (h's)" Others felt that the situation was worse with regard to sport, and would still be concerned about "being labelled by football scarves" associated with specific local teams.

14.2.3 Children

The safety of children was raised by all groups. In some respects, children's safety was believed to have improved. One group recalled "warning kids not to pick up anything off the street in case they were bombs or incendiary devices" during the Troubles, a situation which had now improved. The "fear of taking kids into town" due to the possibility of bombs had been alleviated. Some groups also observed that safety in children's and nursing homes had improved, as the "care of children and vulnerable adults is better monitored and policed".

There were other issues, however, on which there was less agreement. Some women felt that children were less likely now to be "stoned on the way to school", but others felt that the danger remained the same. Other women felt that it was no longer the case that "the kids were not allowed to leave their own neighbourhoods", but some felt that the issue was unchanged. One Protestant group felt that bonfires had posed "a big risk to children" in the past, and that this remained a cause for concern today.

When women spoke of problems particularly regarding community safety, children and young people were often discussed. Groups agreed that fear for the safety of their children in the community today had increased, and felt that their children faced a wider array of dangers now than they had before. Drugs and alcohol were felt to be central problems across all communities, as well as criminal activity such as robberies and burglaries which were associated with these problems. In one group, speaking about these issues, there was a perception that "violence is now indiscriminate – the perpetrators are within your own community".

Childhood was, however, felt to be an important part of the solution. Many women felt that "parents working more and longer hours" meant that children had limited input from their parents. There was a feeling that a twin approach was needed to childhood. On the one hand, women felt strongly that flexible, affordable and quality childcare was needed for the times when parents needed to be at work, and that employers needed to become increasingly involved in childcare provision. It was also felt that children would benefit from creative community-based projects such as arts projects. On the other hand, it was suggested that there also needed to be a refocus on support for family time and parental input. Parenting was raised by a number of groups, with a feeling that parenting skills courses should be more widely available than they currently are. It was suggested that from an early age, children needed to be taught the difference between right and wrong, and that parents had a major role to play in this.

14.2.4 Communities

Discussions on safety raised both positive and negative memories of community life. Groups from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds felt that the absence of soldiers on the streets was better for communities. Many women, particularly from Catholic groups, had memories of being stopped and searched in their own communities, and many felt that this had changed for the better today. However others mentioned PSNI random checks, with one woman stating that she "still felt the same when faced with a police check possibly due to past experiences".

Sectarian intimidation of both Protestants and Catholics was also a feature of community life during the Troubles, leading to segregation. Both intimidation and segregation between Catholics and Protestants was perceived to have improved in the present. One rural group mentioned having felt "unsafe in bars and in chapel", due to shootings in the local area, a situation which was felt to have improved today.

However, groups from all backgrounds spoke of the advantages of community life during the conflict, with women recalling that "everyone knew one another", and that "neighbours watched out for each other". This was felt by many to no longer be the case and many women felt "unsafe" as a result. Common reasons for feeling unsafe across all groups were: concern over crime rates, burglaries, abuse, muggings and robbery. One group felt that adding to the problem was the concern that "we do not have an acceptable police force". Many aspects of home safety were felt to have improved. Women recalled "barricading yourself within the house for protection", and "daily checking of houses to ensure that they were safe – bolts on doors, cages on windows, drop bars". In most communities, it was believed that this degree of security measure was no longer needed and many welcomed the fact that home safety mechanisms were better and fewer open fires also contributed to improved safety.

Problems in local communities such as crime and anti-social behaviour were associated by many groups with the "decimation of the fabric of communities". There was a sense that while community and women's groups worked to build community infrastructure, centralised government decisions were eroding it, with the closure of post offices causing older people to suffer, the closure of schools meaning that a key focal point for community interaction was removed, and the removal of localised health services. Women called for the retention of post offices and local schools, and for "localised health services that are relevant". There was a feeling that funding was being withdrawn from many voluntary and women's organisations at exactly the wrong time, given their importance in providing community-based services in health, education and advice.

14.2.5 Crime

Groups from all backgrounds shared the common belief that crime had got worse since the Troubles. Crimes such as burglaries, robberies from businesses, and car theft were all perceived to be on the increase.

Violent crimes such as attacks on older people, sexual crimes, homophobic attacks, racial assaults, assaults on Travellers, and knife crime were also felt to have worsened. Many groups made a connection between the perceived increase in crime, and higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse. Drugs in particular were raised across many of the groups as a growing cause for concern. The result was that many groups reported similar levels of vigilance, and “wariness of strangers”, as they had practiced during the Troubles. Policing was not an issue raised by all groups. One Catholic group discussed “the lack of an acceptable police force”. A rural Catholic group discussed what they perceived to be a “new issue”. There was a perception that “during the troubles, paramilitaries ‘policed’ the area. Nowadays, there is a shortage of policing in a republican area”. There were calls for support for neighbourhood watch schemes, fitting sentences for crimes, and more prison facilities, as well as better support from politicians.

14.2.6 Paramilitary activity

Paramilitary activity was raised as a key issue for community safety across both Protestant and Catholic groups, but mostly by the former, particularly rural groups. One woman from a Protestant group said: “I felt that in the early days, they kept us safe. They are now fighting with each other – feuds”. This was felt to be a new post-conflict issue. In one group, it was perceived that the fear of abduction and shooting was the same today as it was during the Troubles. Others spoke of “fear” and “bitterness” towards paramilitaries. Overall, when women spoke of paramilitary activity, they connected it with drugs-related crime, intimidation and violence.

Groups from all backgrounds shared the common belief that crime had got worse since the Troubles.

14.2.7 Young People

With regard to young people, there was great concern over drugs and alcohol misuse and its connection to suicide and self-harm and anti-social behaviour and crime. While one group felt that younger people had better opportunities to socialise together now, most groups focused on their anxiety about the climate of drugs, alcohol and aggression in which that socialising took place. Many groups shared a “concern over young men: happy slapping, knife culture, bullying, the internet giving explicit instructions how to kill yourself, drug and alcohol abuse”.

Groups suggested a range of solutions including doing “a survey of young people and ask them what they want”:

- There was concern about “lack of parental responsibility, control, or interest” from some parents. It was felt that this needed to be addressed by encouraging greater parental responsibility, including education for young parents on teaching the importance of respect for people and property
- More education within schools re effect of drugs and alcohol – particularly primary schools
- Rehabilitation programmes and counselling for young people
- Suicide awareness training for young people and families
- Greater support needed for young people and their families. For example, one group suggested education for parents about websites frequented by children and young people such as BEBO, so that parents have an increased awareness of the kind of company and discourses their children are participating in
- A greater connection between community, schools and homes
- Better services for young people including youth clubs and facilities especially for those aged 8 – 20. Some felt that higher levels of after-schools provision was needed, as well as clubs and summer schemes
- Education about the “real world” – outreach programmes to African countries, for example, which would benefit young people and the communities they visited
- More interaction within communities, which it was felt could be facilitated by women’s organisations
- Get young people involved in the community centres and women’s groups
- Training on active citizenship
- Education on how to cook and healthy eating
- Training in vocational skills
- IT training – one group suggested “getting the library bus kitted out with IT equipment”
- Less red tape for young people hoping to start own business.

14.2.8 Work

Across all groups, there was agreement that many aspects of safety in relation to work had improved. Women felt that it was now possible to travel safely to work. It was felt that discrimination and equality laws had greatly reduced sectarianism and bigotry in the workplace. Women working across the Peace Line felt that they were now safer than they had been during the Troubles. Women working in shops who had “had to watch for incendiary devices” felt that their situation was now better, although in one group there was a perception that “fear is returning, due to dissident republicans”.

14.2.9 Travel and mobility

The issue of transport and mobility was one in which there was broad agreement across all groups that there had been significant improvement since the conflict. Women felt that transport provision had improved, and that it was easier “getting from A to B - improved infrastructure, no road blocks, no army check points”. Other women felt “less worried about travelling through interface areas”, and another group observed that the problem of “no-go areas for people in a military profession” was now better.

It was generally felt to be less necessary to “stay within your own community”. One group recalled “visiting friends of different religions in other estates – dangerous, had to meet in neutral areas” during the Troubles, a situation which was felt to have improved. Problems associated with travelling to hospital, and for some women, travelling to prison, had improved, as there were “less men in prison because of the troubles”. Some aspects of social life were broadly felt to have improved. For women from Catholic groups for example, “socialising with anyone in the security forces was a no-no” during the conflict, but was felt to be more acceptable now. Others were relieved to “no longer have to travel over the border for a night out”.

Some women from Protestant groups felt that it was now easier to take a taxi home from another area than it was during the Troubles (the issue being that taxi drivers often “didn’t want to take you home as it was dangerous for them”). Some felt that this problem had improved, but others felt that it had become worse. Similarly, some Protestant women felt that it was now easier to “go to nationalist areas where shopping centre was located”, although others felt that the problems remained the same.

14.2.10 Priority Issues

As well as discussing issues around safety, women also had the opportunity to consider priority issues requiring immediate attention, on which their group could campaign if they so desired. Each group had different priorities, although there was considerable overlap at times. Issues included:

- Safer streets and communities
- The need to take drugs and alcohol off the streets by working with young people and targeting drug dealers and off-licences
- More visible community policing in order to cut down crime such as car theft, burglaries, drugs, and attacks on the elderly
- Improved local transport services for rural areas, leading to improved safety for women and young people
- Improved local transport services for rural areas, leading to improved safety for women and young people.
- Improved road safety
- Increased awareness of child protection issues
- Increased focus on children’s transport and safety.

14.3 Issues in Education

14.3.1 Community and women’s education

Women’s community education was very important to a large number of participants. There were concerns regarding the limitations placed on community education: “there is a wider choice of classes, yet funding regulations are restrictive - not meeting needs of community”. Others felt that “third level institutes are not recognising the value of community education”, and some were concerned at the perceived “lack of childcare in community education”, something which they felt was a new issue, caused by prohibitive requirements on the part of funders.

Overall, there was agreement that there needed to be a greater emphasis on women’s education. One group suggested a study on the impact of women’s education, which could also identify gaps. Progression in particular was raised as an issue that groups needed to be resourced to address. As well as new funding to address ongoing challenges, there was a call for funders to support “what we already have” – tried and tested projects which are delivering. Rural groups called for the formalisation of support for their work, and considered that there was a “shortfall in gender-proofing in rural affairs”.



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Women spoke of the low levels of women in public life in general, as MLAs, MPs, and on Boards, and suggested a range of measures to address the shortfall:

- Confidence building for women which raises political awareness
- Training and working to become professional lobbyists, in order to move strategically towards goals, and show we are serious (some women felt that already women were in a better position and that government was starting to listen)
- Get young women involved – to modernise, give a different perspective and keep the sector vibrant – need to do this by designing projects around young women’s needs and providing properly resourced childcare.

14.3.2 Equality between boys and girls

Many women shared the perception that during the Troubles, the education of girls took second place to that of boys. One group spoke of the “belief that boys were more important”. Others felt that “girls were kept back” in the past, with one group suggesting that “girls were encouraged to leave school but boys encouraged to stay on even though girls wanted to stay on”. One woman recalled: “I didn’t go to school – I was kept off to help with younger siblings as mother was suffering from a nervous breakdown”. The issue of “kids being kept off school” was raised in another group, who felt that the situation had improved “thanks to new legislation”. The priority afforded to girls was felt to have improved significantly now. As one woman put it: “women have the same prospects as anyone else, if they choose to take them”.

Inequalities between Catholic and Protestant children during the conflict were raised. One Catholic group spoke of "very little opportunities - sectarianism, segregation, bigotry - treated as a second class citizen because of faith". Another Catholic group observed: "Education is more equal today and most children have same opportunities as their Protestant counterparts". Another Catholic group had the perception that "in the later years of the Troubles, 'our kids' started to go to university". Most groups felt that the situation had vastly improved, although some still expressed concern about sectarianism at further education colleges.

14.3.3 General and special provision

Education in general was broadly felt to be better now than during the conflict, across groups of all backgrounds. Despite that, many believed there was "not enough discipline in schools today", but they also felt that they had "more support from teachers", and many shared the view that "teachers are still dedicated but targets are putting them under pressure". Women were supportive of the move to smaller class sizes, which meant more attention for children. There was also enthusiasm for incentives offered for children staying on at school. In one group there was concern expressed about the curriculum, which was felt to be less satisfactory now than during the Troubles.

Pre-school and nursery provision was felt to be better, as was provision of Integrated Education, and Irish Language Schools. Sports facilities and encouragement for children in sports were felt to be better.

Provision for special needs was broadly felt to be better now than during the conflict, although with improvement still needed. One group observed that "there were more special schools in the past, but now there is more provision in mainstream schools for special needs". However, some other groups held the view that "more help and support is needed for special needs students". Issues such as dyslexia were felt to be better recognised and managed today than they had been before. However, there was a view that "Essential Skills" (basic literacy and numeracy) had declined, with people leaving school unable to read or write. One group had the perception that "many parents are unable to help children with homework as they cannot read or write themselves". There was a common concern for "people slipping through the net" in this way. One group observed: "Community education in the form of women's centres goes some way to addressing this, but they do not have sufficient funding or resources. This is a terrible shame".

14.3.4 Social class and affordability of education

It was felt that school uniforms for primary school children "making everyone the same" was an improvement. However, some women raised the issue of "self-consciousness about free school dinners - colour-coded dinner tickets for free dinners stigmatises some children". It was felt that although it was now easier to receive support for sending children to grammar school there was "not enough emphasis on skills". Many women felt that "apprenticeships and skills-based trades are on the decline - no sponsorship or apprenticeships available". This was seen as a problem as it meant "fewer positive routes for non-academic children".

There was agreement across groups that higher education which was "not accessible to working classes" during the Troubles, had become more accessible to all now. However one group remarked that "while it is easier to get to university, there is less chance of a good job at the end of it". There was also a common view that the absence of student grants was a problem.

There was a suggestion from one group that there was "a need for formal recognition and accreditation for community workers who have worked through the Troubles". This was felt to be a new issue, and was important "so that community workers will have improved employment prospects after funding ceases".

14.3.5 Travel and access

Generally speaking, travel to school, training colleges and night classes was considered to be better across all groups, including rural groups. An urban group discussed being "worried when they went to training institutes as they were all in unsafe areas". They did not consider this to be an issue any more. However, other groups, discussing the issue of "school uniforms making kids targets", were undecided as to whether this situation had improved, with some suggesting there was still a risk of attack.

Across groups from all backgrounds, segregation of schoolchildren by both religion and gender was considered to have improved. One group recalled how, during the Troubles, children "walked on separate pavements to different schools", and considered that this had improved. Fighting between Protestant and Catholic schools was also perceived to have decreased in frequency. One group raised the fact that the "Troubles were unaddressed at school" during the conflict, and that this had now improved.

Rural women mentioned the challenge of taking children to and from schools in a rural area. Some used buses, but other women always collected their children. Different school start times was felt to be an ongoing issue. One group felt that "it used to be to prevent kids fighting, now it's for traffic control". There was also a view that children in rural areas faced "a very long school day" and that this was a new issue which needed to be addressed

14.3.6 Selection

There were differing views on the 11+, an issue particularly picked up by women in rural groups. Some women felt that because there was "a better quality of education in all schools" there was "less pressure on children to pass 11+ and get into grammar schools". However, many felt that "peer pressure around the 11+" had got worse. There was a sense that there was "too much pressure especially on young children". Others felt that the new issue of "uncertainty about the transfer procedure" was a problem for children.

14.3.7 Priority Issues

Government spending on education was perceived to be worse across groups from all backgrounds, and the problem of schools closing due to lack of money was considered to have remained a problem in the post-conflict situation. The loss of local primary schools was particularly felt by some groups to be an issue, constituting an unravelling of community infrastructure.

A number of issues were raised in relation to the safety of children in schools. Bullying was believed to have become worse than during the Troubles. In one group, the availability of drugs, and glue-sniffing at school was discussed. Some women felt that this problem had worsened, while others felt that it had improved. In another group "truancy, underage drinking, running errands for paramilitaries" were problems which were all felt to have become worse for schoolchildren in recent years.

In identifying priority areas requiring urgent attention, on which they could campaign if they so desired, women listed the following:

- More support for women's education and access to qualifications
- More special needs schools and facilities in the community
- An approach to the 11+ / transfer test which ensures children a "fair deal in education"
- Improved Essential Skills support to ensure people do not "fall through the net"
- Improved discipline and respect at school

- Awareness-raising in school of issues affecting the community, and the role of the individual in the community
- Increased levels of community outreach education
- More affordable university access – more grants, fewer loans
- Measures to ensure that children from all backgrounds can access university (e.g. mentoring, student welfare groups)
- Improved parental attitudes to children’s education.

14.4 The Economy

As well as issues in Health, Safety and Education, some economic issues were also raised. These included:

- Increasing levels of poverty and debt
- Rising food and oil prices
- Despite falling house prices, housing still unaffordable and unavailable
- The need for regeneration and job creation in local communities. In one case, for example, it was felt that the community urgently needed business development to proceed at a local army base in order to provide jobs in the local community
- The issue of migrant workers was raised. While some felt that support was needed including sports and social events and education in English and Irish, others felt that the cheap labour of migrant workers was further compromising an already struggling economy.

15. Conclusions

The women who participated in this project produced a wealth of information about women’s experiences of the conflict. In some of the themes discussed in this report, there was remarkable congruity between the experiences of rural and urban and Protestant and Catholic women. In other areas, there were clear differences, and these have been highlighted throughout.

15.1 Observations

- I. There was a high degree of commonality in the way that women from different backgrounds talked about their experiences of childhood, motherhood, travel and mobility and emotional impact and coping mechanisms, with women reporting similar experiences and using similar language to describe their feelings and responses to the situations in which they found themselves.
- II. A number of women across all groups had experienced violence and loss. Many had sons, husbands, fathers, nephews, and sometimes sisters shot or killed by bombs. It was notable, however, that in women’s personal reflections, there were no explicit references to the loss of a son or husband killed as a result of membership of the security forces. Likewise, there were no explicit references to the loss of a son or husband as a result of membership of the IRA. There may be a number of reasons for this. It is unlikely that no one had involvement in the security forces or the IRA but it may suggest that when women are recalling personal loss they consider it first in terms of their loved one’s relationship to themselves, and not in terms of their involvement in external agencies. While some women spoke of male relatives killed “by the Brits”, or “in a sectarian shooting” for example, most women, both Protestant and Catholic, do not give details of the circumstances in which they lost their loved ones. Many women simply say: “My son was killed” or “My husband was shot”.

- III. Slightly more Catholic than Protestant women spoke of relatives being shot in the '70s and '80s. Protestant women had more recollections in this period of proximity to bombs and bomb scares, and a constant sense of fear of going into town and going shopping.
- IV. Women from Catholic communities had a wider variety of recollections of disruptions to home and family life, and trouble in the community relating to the '60s, '70s and '80s, largely due to army house raids, internment, and local riots and protests. Women from Protestant communities had a wider variety of recollections of disruptions to home and family life, and trouble in the community, relating to the '90s and '00s, largely due to paramilitary activity and intimidation. There was a sense that for women from Catholic groups, the early period of the conflict was the time in which their private domestic space was most likely to be violated, and that this had passed to a significant degree, whereas for women from particularly rural Protestant groups, recent years had brought the greatest violation of their private domestic space.
- V. It was notable that comparatively few women from Protestant backgrounds spoke of participation in protest activities, marches and demonstrations, as compared with Catholic women. It was also notable that very few women at all spoke of involvement in paramilitary activities, with only a very small proportion recalling activities such as “moving materials”. The small number who did were mostly from Catholic groups. It is difficult to assess the extent to which this reflects levels of women’s activism throughout the conflict. It may be a true reflection, or it may be that women were less inclined to divulge this kind of information, even as part of an anonymous exercise.
- VI. Many more Protestant than Catholic women had experiences of emigration, and many of these were now based in rural groups. For some, this was a matter of survival: having a husband in the military often meant that it was impossible to stay. While there was a sense from women in urban and rural Catholic groups, and in urban Protestant groups, that the conflict was literally on the doorstep on a regular basis particularly in the '70s and '80s, women in rural Protestant groups were more inclined to signal a sense of disconnection and “isolation”. This may have made it easier to make the decision to leave. Women from these communities may also have had greater access to resources which enabled them to leave, but there is no specific evidence for this in the findings.
- VII. It is generally accepted that there have traditionally been lower levels of community development in Protestant areas than in Catholic areas. However, because this project drew on the experiences of women active in community development in their areas, this distinction was not clear from women’s input, with both Protestant and Catholic groups reporting high levels of activity. Indeed, women from Protestant groups tended to say more about involvement in cross-community activities over the years.
- VIII. Women from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds share relief and optimism about the Peace Process, and many sense tangible benefits. However, the findings clearly indicate that some women are still waiting for peace to find their families and their communities.

15.2 Significance of the project

There have been many outcomes to this project besides the production of a report which catalogues women's experiences:

- It demands that attention be paid to the experiences of women in the conflict and during the Peace Process. It makes it difficult for women to be overlooked as passive bystanders in a conflict which is often considered to have mainly affected men because it makes clear that all aspects of women's lives were affected by the Troubles.
- It resists oversimplistic categorisation of women as having any one experience of the conflict. It draws attention to the common ground between women of different backgrounds, and also to the different experiences of women, depending on where they came from. While women shared many similar experiences and heartaches, it was nonetheless different, for example, to be a rural Protestant woman from a middle class background in the '70s than to be a woman from an urban Catholic background in the '70s. Each had her joys and her burdens.
- The key focus of this project was the impact of the conflict on women. One of the unexpected outcomes of the project, however, has been a wealth of information about what it was like to be a child during the Troubles. The experiences which women recalled from their own childhoods, and the situations that they have supported their own children through, constitute an important area of study in themselves, and point to a need for further exploration of childhood and conflict.
- In their discussions, women suggested a variety of solutions to addressing inequalities and improving community life, ranging from tried and tested projects, to innovative solutions. It became apparent during the course of the project that in addition to their central and continuing focus on women's development and education, many women's groups are also potentially well-placed to champion projects aimed at addressing a range of issues impacting on the wellbeing of their communities, which is, after all, the context in which many women began their community activism in the first place. If women participate in a similar project to this one in twenty years time, it looks likely that there will be even more common ground than there has been in recent years.

16. The Transition to Peace and the Transformation of Gender Relations

A post-project conference took place on 5th June 2008 at the Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown. This enabled participants and other interested individuals to hear the interim findings of the project and to discuss in round-table format the key issues that needed to be addressed. At the close of the conference Professor Cynthia Cockburn, renowned researcher and writer, delivered an inspirational and thought-provoking address, providing examples of women working for a transition to peace in three countries that had experienced violent conflict: Guatemala, Serbia and Cyprus. She had travelled over 80,000 miles in two years to research her last book *From Where We Stand: war, women's activism and feminist analysis*, emphasising the importance of women establishing 'a base in which they can work consciously as women, with women, building feminist perceptions about how war affects women, how it bears on relations between men and women, and what that implies for peace.'

The full text of her address can be found on the WRDA website: www.wrda.net

From Guatemala we heard of women who started a project they called 'from victims of sexual violence to actors for change' (Actoras de Cambio), who went out into the country to locate women who had been raped during the war, as part of a strategy by the State Army to demoralise communities that supported the insurgency. Their work was to help to recover memory and heal pain. The lesson from Actoras de Cambio was that the recovering of historical memory was crucial in helping to 'liberate our energies for peace and reconstruction.' But more than just telling is needed, we also have to go through a process of bodily and spiritual healing if we're to move forward: 'The pain we experienced in the past and we describe to each other now is built into our bodies. Our bodies carry the memory, they are a record of the conflict. You can't build peace on top of pain. We have to heal ourselves in order to leave it behind.'

Cynthia described this process as one of 'cultural transformation': the point and purpose of the process of recovering memory, speaking about pain, working to heal body and mind and becoming active, women gaining agency, helping to transform cultures in such a way that they will no longer predispose to further war. 'Transitional moments' can 'afford moments of demilitarization and demobilization... but violence can shift from militarist violence to civil violence and back again - and violent criminality is insecurity. It prepares a new generation for armed conflict.'

Women in Black in Belgrade, Serbia, demonstrated publicly in the central square throughout the war - and continue to do so - against nationalism, militarism and patriarchy. Serb women and Bosnian Muslim women have worked hard to rebuild contact and trust between the two communities. The strength of the trust they have forged has meant that they are able to go together on the anniversary to commemorate and mourn the massacre in Srebrenica in 1995 when Serb forces killed around 10,000 Bosnian Muslims. Women of the victim group and women of the perpetrator group standing side by side. Women in Black raise difficult questions - what did we do about this at the time? What are we going to do about it now? The Serbian women are developing a political practice they call 'caring for self and for the other equally', as part of the transition to peace.

In Cyprus, Greek Cypriot women and Turkish Cypriot women work together in an organisation called Hands Across The Divide. They too are trying to act together as women and make some contribution to the kind of reconnection between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot that might change minds and encourage the population to vote for a peace agreement. They have also given cross-community support to the activism of some individual members. A founding member of the group is Sevgul Uludag, who works in a Turkish-language newspaper, *Yeniduzen*. She has travelled around the North and the South of the island, finding and talking with people who have missing relatives who 'disappeared' without trace during the armed conflict. In her newspaper column, which is also translated into Greek and published in the south, Sevgul tells their stories. As Cynthia said: 'Where people know the perpetrators, she names them. Where people believe there are burial sites hiding war crimes, she's calling for them to be excavated. This is dangerous work.'

There are many reasons why war takes place and prevents peace from taking root. One is gross disparities of wealth and poverty, as in Guatemala. Another cause of war is extremist ideas about ethnicity, national identity and religion manipulated by ambitious leaders - as in Serbia, and Cyprus. But there is another driving force, another motor of war that most people overlook and which is visible in all these wars - it is gender relations. What goes on between men and women in our societies. It is not just by chance that all these groups meet as women, that they are feminist projects. They have no doubt at all that gender is connected with war. The way we live gender, as patriarchy, as a relation of inequality, and even of domination by one sex over the other, tends to shape men and masculinity in a particular way - as aggressive, combative, and misogynist. Disrespectful of women and the values of everyday life. But it's not just men. Women too are caught up in these patriarchal gender relations. Many women are activists for peace - but we are not natural peacemakers.

Too often we bring up our children so that as adults they reproduce the entrenched patterns of the past. We defend our men whatever they do. And sometimes we ourselves join the war mongering, and even sometimes the carnage.

Transforming the way we live gender, transforming our masculinities and femininities so that they don't any longer perpetuate violence between wars, so they don't any longer predispose our countries to war, this is part of the cultural transformation that is necessary.

In Northern Ireland after the Good Friday agreement it was women, along with other organisations of civil society, who made sure that peace was spelt out using the word 'fair'...that a future post-conflict society would enshrine not just a cessation of violence, but a principle of equality, of 'fairness' on every dimension. Of course 'fair deals' at last for Catholics and Protestants, Republicans or Unionists; BUT 'fair deals' too for women in relation to men; and others that history had trodden down. Cultural transformation. Is the transition from conflict to peace here embodying a new deal between women and men? Are women being taken more seriously – in politics, in the community, in the home? Is there a new, disarmed, co-operative masculinity on the horizon?'

Women from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds share relief and optimism about the Peace Process, and many sense tangible benefits.

Groups Attending

1 Carrickfergus Women's Forum 2 Corpus Christi Women's Group 3 Forkhill Women's Centre 4 Galbally Women's Group 5 Greenway Women's Group 6 Windsor Women's Centre 7 The Shared City Project 8 Relatives for Justice (Larne Women's Group unable to attend)



NOTES

- ¹ The policy of internment meant the arrest and detention without trial of people suspected of being members of illegal paramilitary groups. It was introduced on 9 August 1971 and ended on 5 December 1975. According to CAIN, "during this period a total of 1,981 people were detained; 1,874 were Catholic / Republican, while 107 were Protestant / Loyalist" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/intern/sum.htm>).
- ² The B-Specials, known as the Ulster Special Constabulary, were, according to CAIN, "an auxiliary paramilitary force" of the British administration, originally founded in 1920. They were a branch of part time officers deployed during the early years of the conflict particularly to police patrols and checkpoints. Cain describes them as "an entirely Protestant force and were viewed with distrust and fear by Catholics" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/uorgan.htm>).
- ³ CAIN summarises events at Drumcree in 1995: "On Sunday 9 July 1995, for the first time in 188 years, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) prevented an Orange Order march from proceeding to Portadown on its way back from an annual church service at Drumcree. The Orangemen who had assembled at Drumcree refused to move away thus beginning a two day stand-off...The stand-off continued the following day, and there were sporadic outbreaks of rioting in Drumcree and other Loyalist areas throughout the North...Later, Paisley and David Trimble attempted to break through police ranks at Drumcree Parish Church, but were prevented from doing so by riot squad officers and were taken away for further negotiations with senior police officers. Talks continued all through the night". An uneasy compromise brought a temporary resolution, but neither marchers nor residents were satisfied. The issue re-emerged in subsequent summers (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/parade/develop.htm>).
- ⁴ Martin Hurson, an IRA prisoner in the Maze, joined the hunger strike on 28 May 1981. He died aged 29 after 46 days, on 13 July 1981.
- ⁵ The Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) strike ran from 15 – 28 May 1974. According to CAIN: "The strike was called in protest at the political and security situation in Northern Ireland and more particularly at the proposals in the Sunningdale Agreement which would have given the government of the Republic of Ireland a direct say in the running of the region. The strike lasted two weeks and succeeded in bringing down the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive. Responsibility for the government of Northern Ireland then reverted to the British Parliament at Westminster under the arrangements for 'Direct Rule'" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/uwc/sum.htm>).
- ⁶ The United Unionist Action Council (UUAC) strike took place 3 – 13 May 1977. According to CAIN: "The UUAC included political figures such as Ian Paisley, then leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and Ernest Baird, then leader of the United Ulster Unionist Movement (UUUM), together with members of the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC), and members of Loyalist paramilitary groups including the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The main aims of the strike were to restore devolved government to Northern Ireland under a system of simple majority rule, and to force the British government to introduce tougher security measures against the Irish Republican Army (IRA)" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/uuac/sum.htm>).
- ⁷ "Bloody Sunday" refers to the events that took place in Derry on the afternoon of Sunday 30 January 1972. A Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) march against the continuation of internment was underway, with, according to CAIN, between ten and twenty thousand men, women and children taking part. In a 30-minute period, soldiers of the British Army's Parachute Regiment, shot dead 13 men, and shot and injured a further 13 people (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/bsunday/sum.htm>).
- ⁸ The Shankill Butchers were a group of 11 Loyalists who killed at least 19 Catholics between 1972 and 1977. The gang operated out of a number of Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) drinking dens in the Shankill Road area of Belfast, and received their name because of the brutal methods they used to torture and then kill their victims. They were eventually sentenced to life imprisonment for 112 offences including 19 murders.
- ⁹ The Enniskillen bombing was an IRA attack aimed at the annual Remembrance Day ceremony at the war memorial in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh on 8 November 1987. Eleven people were killed and 63 injured, many seriously.
- ¹⁰ On Saturday 15 August 1998, a car bomb exploded in Omagh, County Tyrone, killing 29 people, as well as two unborn children, and injuring 220 others. It was the largest loss of life in a single incident in Northern Ireland during the current conflict. It is believed to be the work of a splinter group of Republicans calling themselves the real IRA (rIRA) (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/omagh/events.htm>).
- ¹¹ On 9 July 1972, five Catholic civilians were shot dead by the British Army in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast, in an event known as the Springhill Massacre (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch72.htm>).
- ¹² Bobby Sands, leader of the IRA in the Maze Prison, embarked on a hunger strike on 1 March 1981, in protest at the ongoing suspension of special category status for political prisoners. The strike ended on 3 October 1981, by which time Sands and 9 fellow Republican prisoners had died (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/hstrike/summary.htm>). During his hunger strike, Bobby Sands was elected as Member of Parliament (MP) for the Fermanagh / South Tyrone constituency (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/hstrike/chronology.htm>).
- ¹³ On 6 March 1988, three unarmed IRA members were shot dead by undercover members of the British Special Air Service (SAS) in Gibraltar. According to CAIN: "The episode sparked intense controversy and began a chain of events that lead to a series of deaths in Northern Ireland on 16 March 1988 and 19 March 1988. The British government claimed that the SAS shot the IRA members because they thought a bomb was about to be detonated. Eye-witnesses claimed that those shot were given no warning" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch88.htm>).
- ¹⁴ On 30 October 1993, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), described by CAIN as "a cover name used by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA)", killed six Catholic civilians and one Protestant civilian in the 'Rising Sun' bar in Greysteel, County Derry. According to CAIN: "A further 13 people were injured in the attack one of whom later died of his injuries on 14 April 1994" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch93.htm>).
- ¹⁵ On 12 July 1998, three young Catholic brothers aged 9, 10, and 11 years, were burnt to death after their home, in Ballymoney, County Antrim, was petrol bombed in a sectarian attack carried out by Loyalists (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch98.htm>).

- ¹⁶ 'Bloody Friday' is the name given to the events that occurred in Belfast on Friday 21 July 1972. According to CAIN: "During the afternoon of 'Bloody Friday' the IRA planted and exploded 22 bombs in Belfast which, in the space of 75 minutes, killed 9 people and seriously injured approximately 130 others" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/bfriday/sum.htm>).
- ¹⁷ Jean McConville was abducted and killed by the IRA in December 1972, who had claimed that she had been an informant. According to CAIN, this claim was found to be groundless following an investigation by the Office of the Police Ombudsman in 2006 (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/police/ombudsman/po070706.htm>).
- ¹⁸ On 17 February 1978, twelve people, all Protestant civilians, were killed and 23 badly injured when an IRA incendiary bomb exploded at the restaurant of the La Mon House Hotel near Belfast. All those who died were attending the annual dinner-dance of the Irish Collie Club (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch78.htm#17278>).
- ¹⁹ On 19th March 1988, during the funeral of Kevin Brady, killed at Milltown Cemetery three days earlier, two soldiers were killed. According to CAIN: "a car approached the funeral procession at high speed. The car's passage was blocked and a group of the mourners attacked the two passengers. The two men in the car were later identified as corporals Derek Wood and David Howes of the British Army. One of the soldiers fired a warning shot but both were beaten and overpowered. The two soldiers were driven to waste ground and shot dead" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch88.htm>).
- ²⁰ On Monday 27 August 1979, Louis Mountbatten, a cousin of the Queen, was killed, along with three other people by a booby-trap bomb left by the IRA on a boat near Sligo in the Republic of Ireland (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch79.htm>).
- ²¹ On the same day of the attack on Lord Mountbatten (27 August 1979) 18 British soldiers were killed in an (IRA) bomb attack at Narrow Water, near Warrenpoint, County Down. Six members of the Parachute Regiment were killed in an initial bomb. A further bomb killed twelve more soldiers as troops moved into the area. This represented the British Army's greatest loss of life in a single attack in Northern Ireland (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch79.htm>).
- ²² On 23 October 1993, ten people were killed when a bomb being planted by the IRA exploded prematurely as it was being planted in a fish shop on the Shankill Road, Belfast. With the exception of one of the bombers who was also killed, the rest of those who died were Protestant civilians. A further 57 people were injured in the attack (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch93.htm>).
- ²³ On 23 September 1992, the IRA bombed the Northern Ireland forensic science laboratories in south Belfast. According to CAIN: "Twenty people were injured, the laboratories destroyed, and approximately 700 houses were damaged in the blast" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch92.htm>).
- ²⁴ On Friday 8 May 1987, one civilian and eight members of the IRA were shot dead by soldiers of the Special Air Service (SAS) in Loughgall, County Armagh. According to CAIN: "The IRA members were in the process of attacking the police station at Loughgall when they were ambushed by 40 SAS soldiers. The innocent civilian was shot dead by one SAS group as he drove through the village. This incident was the highest loss of life suffered by the IRA in any one incident" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/chron/ch87.htm>).





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