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Gender, violence and cultures of silence: young women and paramilitary violence

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growth in analysis of women and conflict, this has tended to overlook the specific experiences of young women. Likewise, in research on youth, conflict and peace, the term 'youth' is often short-hand for young men. Young women's experiences are regularly absent from research and policy discourse, and as a consequence, also absent from public understanding and practice responses. In this paper, we prioritise the views of and on young women to forefront their experiences of one specific form of conflict-related violence – paramilitary violence. We demonstrate that forefronting young women's experiences, and adopting an understanding of violence beyond that which privileges physical violence, unearths the multiple ways in which conflict-related violence is experienced. We further demonstrate how adopting an intersectional lens that prioritises age and gender can surface the specific experiences of young women, and the various ways in which these become silenced by cultures that omit, coerce, reduce and minimise.

Gender, youth and violent conflict

While many theories and studies on war and conflict exist, these have tended to 'individually and collectively neglect gender' (Sjorberg 2018, 3). The visibility of men in political and military arenas (Ashe and Harland 2014), a focus on particular forms of violence and the masculine language, codes and labels associated with war, conflict and violence (Taylor and Hardman 2004), have prioritised men's experiences. Traditional understandings, theorisations and responses to war and conflict have, therefore, been partial, limiting and dominated by 'knowledge about men' (Tickner 2001 cited in Sjorberg 2018). This knowledge is generative, informing peace building initiatives and transitional justice mechanisms. Within this cycle, women's experiences are rendered at best invisible, and at worst 'immaterial' (Rooney 2018).

Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the privileging of masculinity and the sidelining of gender and power in theorisations and responses to war and conflict (Ashe

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2009). They call for an analysis that not only recognises the shared experiences of women and men, but an examination of how gender mediates conflict-related experiences of, for example, 'discrimination, invasion, occupations, and violence' (Rooney 2018, 333). A gendering of war and conflict, therefore, prioritises locating and including overlooked voices and experiences, as well as troubling and re-constituting masculinist constructs that serve to exclude women's experiences. Feminist research has enhanced understandings of the gender dynamics of war, conflict and conflict transformation through a focus on neglected, or what were deemed 'trivial' (Enlow 2002 cited in Ashe 2009) elements of war and political violence – '"low" politics, everyday violence's, and people's lives' (Sjoberg 2018, 6). This has surfaced women's experiences, moving them from passive actors and appendages of men and families, to active agents and 'victims' in their own right.

It has further surfaced the ways in which women experience violence, including but not limited to gender-based violence. This has required a broader understanding of harm, violence and victimhood than that applied in traditional theorisations and policy discourses (O'Rourke 2012). An exclusive focus on killings and physical violence, for example, sees women under-represented or deprioritised as victims. In the hierarchy of violence, men are the targets of violence, women the by-standers, the wives, mothers and daughters. Their experiences of violence, including non-physical harms, and the 'sensed' ways in ways in which they experience war and conflict (Sjorberg 2018) are concealed through this narrow, masculinist lens. The increased focus on sexual violence as a highly gendered tool of conflict has also disrupted historical narratives of war in which men are traditionally presented as protectors and heroic victors (e.g. Connolly 2021). Further, a gendered analysis of violence has demonstrated the ways in which many women continued to experience violence in 'post-conflict' situations (e.g. Gilmartin 2019).

Despite these advances, young women have often been overlooked in conflict research and global initiatives on women, peace and security. Systematic reviews of women, war and conflict, which include studies of young women tend to focus more generally on women and children, the gender of the child not always forefronted as a priority area of analysis (e.g. Bendavid et al. 2021; Kamali, Munyuzangabo, and Siddiqui 2020). Those that focus on (all) children tend to do so in relation to physical health and child development (e.g. Kadir, Shenoda, and Goldhagen 2019). Specific analyses of girls/young women, conflict and violence has tended to focus on sexual violence and exploitation, sexual development and reproductive health (Jennings, George, and Jacobs 2019; Neal, Stone, and Ingham 2016), with some inclusion of girls as soldiers and combatants (UN Women 2018; McKay 1998). Analysis of the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has also revealed that young women, as a consequence of gender and age, fell 'between the majority of youth-focused peacebuilding and prevention programmes [which focused on young men], and women-targeted peace building interventions [which focused on adult women]' (UN Women 2018, 8). As a response young women have been deliberately written into the action plans of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security.

A gender analysis and policy response to war and conflict does not guarantee the inclusion of all women. Indeed, much feminist research in this field might be accused of occluding age (Ní Aoláin, Chan, and Haynes 2018). The relational focus on (hetero) women as wives, partners or mothers, or their role within community or political forums might in part explain the absence of young women (who have less access to

these forums). Adopting a youth focus also does not guarantee the inclusion of all young people. Within much of the research on youth and conflict, the specific experiences of young women are either not researched or disaggregated in generic studies of youth. As Ní Aoláin, Chan, and Haynes (2018, xl) note, in conflict-affected societies discussions of youth are often 'short-hand for young men'.

The relative powerlessness of youth combined with the unequal position of women interact to invisibilise the experiences of young women. Yet the complex ways in which gender and age intersect to impact experiences of violence, protection, participation, inclusion and exclusion are not captured through a one-dimensional analysis. As UN Women (2018, 9) states:

> 'The impact of conflict can be exacerbated by age-related inequalities stemming from cultural or social practices and perceptions where young women, due to their age, gender and status are disproportionately affected by power structures which limit access to their rights to education, resources, property, healthcare and others'

An intersectional analysis combining age and gender, therefore, can surface the particular ways in which young women experience conflict, violence and conflict transformation.

The Northern Ireland conflict

Knox notes that 'Northern Ireland is synonymous with the word violence' (Knox 2002, 164). During the most recent period of conflict (colloquially known as 'the Troubles'), around 3700 were killed and 40,000 injured (McKittrick, Kelters, and Feeney 2007), a further 54,000 households were forced to relocate (Hillyard, Rolston, and Tomlinson 2005). In analyses of the Conflict and its legacy, it is regularly reported that young men from economically deprived communities accounted for a high proportion of Troubles-related-deaths (e.g. Smyth, Fay, and Brough 2004), and disproportionally experienced paramilitary violence (Knox 2002). The inference is that young men experienced more exposure to violence than young women (Reilly, Muldoon, and Byrne 2004). It has been suggested that men's more visible roles in the political and military dimensions of political conflict in Northern Ireland 'has meant that the story of the conflict has generally been a story about men' (Ashe and Harland 2014).

The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (1998) signalled a move towards peace, power-sharing and 'normalisation' in Northern Ireland. This included a commitment to the disbandment of paramilitary groups. Such groups (re)emerged during the Conflict to further political agendas (the reunification of Ireland – Republican groups, or a continued union with the UK – Loyalist groups) through violent means, and to protect and police communities in the perceived absence of legitimate policing. Much of the policing *within* communities fell into two categories of 'punishable offences' – crimes within or against the community (e.g. anti-social behaviour, joyriding, theft, drug dealing) and 'political crimes' (e.g. criticisms of paramilitaries, collaboration with the police) (Silke 1998 cited in Knox 2002). Coercive control was, and in some communities continues to be, exerted through intimidation, curfews, fines, exiling, beatings and shootings.

In the years that have followed the ceasefires and Peace Agreements, paramilitarism in various guises has remained. Dissident and splinter groups who are discontent with the terms and outcomes of the peace process continue to threaten the stability of peace and exert control within communities. Official statistics reveal that there have been almost

3000 'paramilitary-style attacks' – assaults and shootings – in the twenty years following the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (1998–2018), and that young people continue to be some of the main victims. Yet these figures significantly underestimate the violence and intimidation experienced in communities. The focus on violent *acts* and the perpetrator-victim framing of violence occludes an understanding of the wider impacts of paramilitary violence, including the experiences of young women.

The impacts and legacies of the Conflict on children and young people have been relatively well researched (e.g. Smyth, Fay, and Brough 2004; Browne and Dwyer 2014), yet little attention has been given to the specific experiences of young women (see McAlister, Gray, and Neill 2007 and Marshall 2011 for exceptions). Reflecting dominant discourses of 'violence' and 'victimisation', these have either been subsumed within general samples of young people, or the focus has been primarily on young men – those deemed the main victims and perpetrators of sectarian and paramilitary violence (e.g. Harland and McCready 2014). The scant research on young people's experiences of paramilitary violence has almost entirely omitted young women, and in applying a gender lens has tended to focus on the links between violence and masculinity (e.g. Walsh and Schubotz 2020). Such approaches, perhaps unintentionally, reproduce narrow understandings of violence that are then reflected in policy and practice.

Study background and methods

The data upon which this paper is based is drawn from a study carried out between 2014 and 2016 (McAlister, Dwyer, and Carr 2018). Research and media reports had illustrated that despite official ceasefires, paramilitary-style groups remained active within some communities of Northern Ireland. Although young people were one of the main targets of 'paramilitary-style' regulation, control and 'punishment', this was largely absent from the post-conflict discourse. The research, therefore, aimed to illuminate the experiences of young people.

Three areas with known paramilitary presence were purposively sampled. These were identified through an analysis of police statistics, newspaper reports and in consultation with a steering group of individuals with knowledge of some of the communities most affected. While each has its unique socio-political history, all are affected by the dual impacts of poverty and conflict (e.g. high levels of violence, injury and/or death; historical underinvestment), and are at the frontline of experiences of conflict legacy. The areas were also chosen to ensure representation of ethno-national identity. One area is a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community, the second a Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community and the third, an interface area. This is an area where one ethno-national group lives alongside another, but often with clear divisions between the two (e.g. peace walls, gates).

Data was collected from 38 young people (aged 16–25 years), and 29 community workers and service providers. Young people were accessed through community-based restorative justice projects, criminal justice agencies, and projects working with some of the most marginalised (e.g. homeless young people, young people with drug and alcohol problems) as these are often those at most risk of coming to the attention of paramilitary-style groups. Given the personal and sensitive nature of the research, most data was collected through in-depth one-to-one interviews. Three focus groups were facilitated at

the request of young people/ projects whereby the young people were small friendship groups who wished to discuss the issues together, or they had been exploring conflict legacy and violence as part of their project work. Talking about paramilitarism carries significant physical and emotional risks. As such, the study was subject to close scrutiny by two ethics committees, ensuring that a number of strategies and protocols were put in place to reduce the risk of harm to participants (see McAlister 2017 for discussion).

Data was analysed thematically, with codes identified individually and then collectively agreed upon by the research team. A selection of transcripts was coded by multiple researchers to ensure intercoder reliability. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns of meaning and experience across the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006) while also allowing individual experience to be retained. This paper is based on the data collected from young people, particularly, but not limited to the eleven young women who took part in the study. Given the particular invisibility of young women in conflict studies, we apply a feminist analysis whereby we centralise the views of, and on, young women. In doing so, we aim to illuminate how a broad analysis of violence unearths the range of ways in which young women experience conflict-related violence and conflict legacy. We argue that in the context of paramilitary violence, a focus on physical violence and violent acts privileges the experiences of (young) men. Through applying an intersectional analysis we demonstrate how age, gender and culture combine to silence young women's experiences of paramilitary violence, impacting public knowledge, political discourse and service responses.

Young women's experiences of violence

Typically, reports of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland have focused on the experience or threat of physical violence. In so doing, these accounts have elevated and foregrounded the experiences of (young) men. It is unsurprising, therefore, that when discussing the differential experiences of young women and young men, research participants often highlighted young men as the main victims of paramilitary violence. Yet young women also provided examples that contradicted the popular discourse that physical violence is the preserve of men. For example, some spoke of hearing about, witnessing or personally experiencing physical violence or its threat. Illustrating this, Maria who was present when paramilitaries raided her friend's house, noted that she escaped a potential assault while others were not so fortunate:

> ' … one of them tried to like hit me with a glass but it … backfired on him, but like they took one of my best mates, she's like, like a year younger than me and they took her out into the back yard and beat her into a pulp, in her stomach and she ended up having to go to the hospital … '

Others were threatened in similar ways. Aoife relayed her experience when 17 years old:

> 'They [paramilitaries] came to the door looking for me and my mammy had to ring me … and was all "look, you have to come home", and I came home and they were there. Two of them in my house. … they had reports of me bullying younger girls and going out to start fights with intent to harm, and this was my last warning, and if they heard of anything again they'd come back to do my knees [kneecap[1] her]. So I don't know if they were going to come back and do my knees with baseball bats or they were going to come back with guns or what they were going to do … '

This incident led to Aoife being placed on suicide watch, feeling unable to leave her home for fear she or her family would be targeted, and eventually relocating. Appointments[2], threats and intimidation as forms of paramilitary violence are well documented in newspaper headlines, public campaigns, social media discussions and television documentaries. Yet the framing of these around (young) men reinforces a public understanding of the maleness of this experience of violence, thus eclipsing the experiences of young women.

When exploring if there were any differences in how young women and young men were treated by paramilitaries, a small number of participants spoke of the sexual nature of violence, control and intimidation that young women experience. Laura provided the following account:

> ' … one of the [paramilitary group] … sexually abused my friend who is only the same age as me [17 years old]. I only found this out a few months ago but it actually happened last year, but I've heard a few things … about him sexually you know abusing girls my age, and it's happened a few times, and the people have tried to say, but nothing, nothing happens, no one, no one would be able to do anything about it. … she said herself there was no point in trying to go to the police because who is going to believe her?'

Laura's account speaks to the multiple ways in which these experiences remain hidden. The reporting of any crime by paramilitaries is difficult due to fear of reprisal. However, the sexual nature of this enables a further silencing. It is well documented that sexual violence is under-reported due to fears that allegations will not be taken seriously, that the victim will not be believed and that involving authorities will lead to further negative consequences. As Laura's account reveals, these fears are amplified when young people perceive paramilitaries to be acting with impunity. Further, there appeared an inability among some young people to even articulate violence of a sexual nature:

Interviewer:	… is there any difference in how they treat women and men?
Joe:	Nah, they get the girls to do it to the women
Holly:	Aye. I wouldn't even repeat it but I know of something and it is absolutely *disgusting* [her emphasis]
Grainne:	Aye, well I know a lot of things have happened to girls
Holly:	Aye, there's stuff that they'll do to girls too is shocking
Joe:	I never heard much about girls, *but I would say they'd keep it quiet* wouldn't they? [emphasis added]
…	
Holly:	I wouldn't even say it, couldn't tell you, some are just cowards sure, just sick cowards, that's all they are
Joe:	I think I know what you're on about
…	
Joe:	It was near here? Aye, I know exactly what you mean

Sex education within Northern Irish schools is framed by religious and moral conservatism. This feeds into a culture whereby sex is a taboo subject, shrouded in secrecy and shame, particularly for young women (McAlister, Gray, and Neill 2007). This maintains a silence around the very types of experiences discussed by these young people. Layered with this is the power of those enacting this violence: the adult – the child; the man – the girl; the powerful – 'the powerless'. As Joe perceptively notes, they'd [paramilitaries] want to keep this form of violence quiet. These prominent men, who claim to be the

protectors of communities, cannot be seen to be enacting the very behaviours they claim to police (e.g. alleged sex offenders[3]). As a result, these experiences exist in the whispers and secrets of communities, which are powerful repositories of local knowledge, rather than the public headlines of violence and intimidation.

Adopting a feminist approach that explores young women's experience through the lens of gender surfaces some of their unreported and under-reported experiences of violence. It illustrates that young women experience paramilitary violence in similar ways to young men but also the 'unique ways in which gender affects individual experience' (Green 2018, 316). Age intersects with gender in further silencing young women's experiences. The power differentials of both age and gender mean discussing, never mind reporting violence, is difficult. This is encapsulated in Laura's belief that no one would believe her. Age and gender, therefore, combine to supress the sorts of accounts presented here.

Touched by violence

While young women experience physical and sexual violence, they also experience paramilitary violence in other ways. Sjorberg (2018) suggests that a narrow analysis of the impacts of war and conflict limits our understanding of the gendered ways in which war is experienced. She argues that traditional analysis has overlooked the sensed experiences of individuals. We employ this notion of the 'sensed experiences of war' – hearing, seeing, feeling violence – in considering how young women are touched in different ways by paramilitary violence.

To be touched by violence often refers to the ways in which one has physically experienced violence, yet many young women (and young men) are touched in other ways. There was, for example, prolific local knowledge of paramilitary presence and activities within their communities. How young women 'heard' about this was through stories passed down in families and in the daily gossip of community life. Young people spoke of incessant stories circulating about the latest victims or activities of paramilitaries. As Jess said: 'You know about them all the time, you hear about them all the time.' Violence is a backdrop to life in communities like those in which Jess and others live, and its reality or potential is ever present. The mixed messages they hear with regards to the 'bad men' (Laura) and the 'protectors' of the community touch young women in complex and contradictory ways. While paramilitaries are an ever present threat (abusers) they are also a 'normal' aspect of community life:

> ' … the paramilitaries will be your neighbour, or will be your friend's dad, so it is all part of the community, do you know what I mean? It's people you grow up knowing … ' (Jane)

While young women claim that they're not all 'bad men', the persistent 'hearing' of stories and the uncertainty about who are the 'bad men' and who are the legitimate guardians of the community creates a general sense of unease and paranoia – ' … that's what fries your brains like, paranoia' (Grainne). In addition to 'hearing' stories, young women spoke of 'hearing' in other ways, including the sounds of violence. The 'boom boom' (Grainne) of shots fired in their streets, the noise of doors being kicked in, the sounds of suffering.

Young women were also touched by violence through 'seeing' – witnessing the abuse of others and seeing the pain of others. 'Seeing stuff' included directly witnessing house raids, physical beatings and shootings. For some this was on multiple occasions:

'Well a good mate of mine was shot *right in front of me* … Another friend … he was getting a gun pointed at his head and the gun jammed, and they beat the fuck out of him and they would have shot him dead like. It was again *right in front of my eyes* that I witnessed that. That's kind of traumatising like too. It's not nice.' (Tam – emphasis added)

Equally traumatising was 'bearing witness' to the pain and suffering that such violence had on individuals. Witnessing the impacts on others was painful for Laura who relayed in vivid detail the beatings received by her uncle when he was a young man. She recalled:

'My uncle … came home with blood pouring all over the place … he had to pick himself up off the road and drag himself home … I must have been six years old and *I still can picture him in my head* what he looked like and I knew, I remember that I knew big men had done this to him … ' (Laura – emphasis added)

The trauma of 'seeing' also extended to witnessing a person so broken by their experience that they took their own life. Aoife, and others, spoke of the pain of losing friends to suicide which they attributed to a combination of trauma and (increased) drug use as a result of being threatened and shot by paramilitaries:

' … my friend committed suicide, and before that he'd been shot twice. [Tearful] … I don't know if it had anything to do with that though because that night he took drugs and then had hung himself that night, so nobody knows whether it was because of that, and the experience and the trauma … He turned to drugs, he turned to them even worse. … They [paramilitaries] put the fear of God in them, if anything they put the fear of God in people and when they go around throwing threats the way they do is it any wonder people are turning to drugs?' (Aoife)

Despite the almost casual ways in which some young women recounted these experiences, they were often steeped in feelings of anger, sadness, loss, fear and confusion. The weight of hearing and seeing was exacerbated by young women embodying the experiences of others, empathically understanding their pain. There is a stickiness to this sensed experience of violence. Hearing and seeing the impacts of violence is long lasting, hard to shift and it leaves its mark. The weight of their own and other's pain stays with them as evidenced in the detail with which they recounted memories both past and present. While the event may be long gone, the memories it evokes and feelings attached to it are much more pervasive and long lasting.

Research has often overlooked the sensed ways in which individuals are touched by violence. The vivid and grotesque nature of physical and sexual violence often eclipse the emotional harm experienced and can conceal the multiple ways in which young women experience violence. Moving beyond the physical and relational provides a wider lens through which to understand the sensory and pervasive ways in which violence is part of young women's everyday lives. This moves the gaze beyond 'extraordinary violence' towards the 'regular violence' that young women routinely experience (McWilliams and Ní Aoláin 2013, 4).

Cultures of silence

These young women's accounts demonstrate the pervasiveness of violence in their lives and the various ways in which paramilitary violence impacts upon them. Yet these experiences are rarely unearthed or acknowledged. In this section, we consider mechanisms through which young women's experiences are silenced and thus absent from the public and political discourse.

The normalisation of violence

Seeing things as normal requires seeing them normalised. In the histories of families and communities, murals and commemoratives, news and political discourse, violence is inescapable. Paramilitaries in various guises have been a feature of these communities for years, and despite an official post-conflict narrative, violence persists. For this so-called 'peace-generation' (i.e. those who have grown up following the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement), that paramilitaries police and punish is not out of the ordinary – 'you hear about it all the time' (Jess). And as 'messed up' as it is, in some cases, it is understood and rationalised: 'It works better than our police system, definitely' (Jane).

Thus, the sensed experience of violence transcends individual acts and is present in the everyday lives of young people in these communities. As such everyone is affected; everyone hears, sees and feels violence. This backdrop downplays the impact of individual experiences and creates a sense that there is nothing out of the ordinary for *these* young women – this is just the way life is. Laura's account speaks to this process of normalisation whereby everyone, where she lives, has 'came in touch with the paramilitaries'. Relaying her experiences of her father being 'beaten', her uncle being shot dead and living in a community in which house raids and gunshots could happen at any time, Laura recognised that for people looking in, this might appear out of the ordinary. Yet in the context of her life this was normal:

> ' … I don't really see it as a scary thing anymore it's just like life now, you know, it's just the way it is.'

Young women also normalised their experiences by filtering them through hierarchies of harm. How the Conflict was reported in the past focused on bombings, shootings and physical attacks. Young women regularly heard stories of how those in their families and communities were affected. In comparison then, their contemporary experiences felt less extreme, removing or limiting their grounds for complaint. For example, despite Tam having seen someone being shot she explained away the impact by stating: 'But sure our parents seen worse didn't they?' Their experiences were also considered less significant in comparison to contemporary conflict-related violence. Current media reporting and government campaigns maintain a hierarchy within which physical attacks on men and young men remain the focus.

Within this environment the violence experienced by many young women is not the kind of violence that is recognised, theirs are not the stories being talked about. And so young women's experiences become hidden, not in secrecy but in their normalcy. Cultures of silence are, therefore, developed and maintained in quiet and unspoken ways. The normalisation of everyday violence and the elevation of particular forms of violence

and harm reduces young women's experiences leading to a form of self-silencing. Young women's experiences are invisible to the outside and invalidated by themselves on the basis of both age and gender.

Coercive silencing

While silence is maintained in the resignation of individuals, it is also more explicitly and deliberately maintained through structures and cultures of coercion and fear. One of the main reasons paramilitary violence is not reported is due to fear of reprisal. Young people know the consequences of speaking out. They see it written on the walls, hear it spoken about in the community, and witness the after effects on individuals:

> ' … things were being painted on walls like [names of] certain individuals, say like 'police tout' … So there be like their name, and they're a tout.[4] And you maybe see that person maybe about a week later and you can physically see that they've been beaten up … ' (Debbie)

Stepping outside the rules of silence brings the consequences of violence. To speak or draw attention to yourself puts you on a pathway in which the potential for violence escalates. From being watched to being warned, to attacks on homes and property, to physical violence and exile, the gradations of punishment are well known:

> ' … the worst thing I've seen is probably windows being put through and told to get out and don't come back … then it'll be the next level of punishment … So they do hand out warnings, but if you push your luck, push your luck, something's going to happen to you … ' (Jane)

This mechanism effectively places blame on the individual. If you bring yourself to their attention it is your fault, if your behaviour does not change you move to the next level of punishment. Knowledge of the escalation of violence places emphasis on the individual to adhere or return to the rules.

Added to this physical threat of violence is a stigma associated with policing. State forces, of which the police were one, were previously viewed as instigators of violence and discrimination within many of these communities. The history of policing in these areas created suspicion and a lack of confidence, the legacy of which has been difficult to dislodge. This is kept alive in the retelling of local histories, and the continued power and significance of local cultures and labels regarding policing. The meaning and implications of being labelled a 'tout' are so powerful that young people would take any form of paramilitary violence rather than report the threat of it to the police:

> Grainne:　You don't go to no police round here now
> Holly:　Yeah
> Interviewer:　So why don't people go to the police?
> Shay:　Because you'll just get threatened again
> …
> Grainne:　You'd get worse (short laugh) … I'd rather get shot than be a tout, do you know what I mean?
> …
> Shay:　I think that there, that's what everybody would say in **** [area] like, you'd rather get shot than be a tout.

In the communities where these young people live there is nothing worse than being known as a 'tout'. Not only does it increase the risk of paramilitary violence but it also

has the potential to label you a traitor of the community. Reporting paramilitary activity to the police, Tam explained, 'classes you as a tout, because they're [the paramilitaries] our people doing that … The cops aren't our people … '. This sense of us and them maintains a silence. While paramilitaries may threaten, regulate, control and punish, they are of the community and in some instances are perceived as 'serving' the community. Maintaining an image of the police as 'other' keeps them at a distance, sustains suspicion and limits the avenues through which individuals can speak out.

The threat associated with reporting (real or imagined) is ingrained, known to all within local communities. Even if young people were to take the associated risks, the perception was that it would be ineffectual. There was a resignation among young women that no one, including the police, could thwart paramilitary activity:

> Interviewer : Do you not think the police could've offered you any protection?
> Aoife : What can they do? Where was their protection for everyone else that got their knees done? Where was their support for the family that had to witness their father and their partner get a bullet between the eyes, do you know what I mean? You can't guarantee it so I'll not waste their time. If it's going to happen it's going to happen, nobody else can stop them.

Coercive control maintains silence in multiple and intersecting ways. Paramilitaries ensure silence through fear, intimation, power, control and violence. The powerlessness felt within communities sustains this silence maintaining current power structures, as 'messed up' as they may be, because there is no way to operate outside of them. Breaking silence would risk becoming labelled in the community, and risk reprisal from paramilitaries while relying on the police to protect (where their protection was perceived as ineffectual). Therefore, from these young women's points of view there is no benefit in reporting. Living within the rules maintains the silence.

Strategic silencing

Abiding by the rules of silence is a means of evading attention and avoiding the potential for violence. As such, young women adopt a range of strategies to maintain their invisibility as a means of protecting and preserving their physical and mental well-being. These very strategies, however, create and maintain further silence around their experiences.

Young women used their experiential knowledge of paramilitaries to keep safe. Knowing how they work and whom or what they focus upon helped them know what situations and circumstances to avoid. They talked of keeping their heads down, keeping themselves to themselves, and thus avoiding getting on the pathway to visibility. Previously involved in drugs, Maria spoke of how she had encountered paramilitaries in the past, and as a result now knew how to keep herself safe: ' … because I have been there, and like I know … what sort of people to stay away from when it comes to all that.' Others made a conscious effort to avoid past friends who were now associated with paramilitaries or particular bars or parts of the estate known to be paramilitary strongholds.

Their accounts pointed to other forms of self-protection, through downplaying or not dwelling on the impacts of their experiences – 'it didn't affect me', 'it wouldn't faze me', 'it didn't bother us', 'sure our parents seen worse' – were common phrases among some of

those who had witnessed and experienced the most extreme violence. More generally keeping your head down, 'getting on with it' was a form of avoidance, getting by in communities where violence or the threat of it, is part of everyday life. These might be seen as forms of strategic silencing. Silencing is not always 'done to' young women and demonstrative of a lack of agency. While it 'can be employed for subordination and erasure, [it] can also be a strategy for coping with a precarious everyday … ' (Selimovic 2020, 1).

Physically removing themselves from places and people, and regulating their behaviours limits external threat. Not dwelling on experiences and reflecting on impact removes some of the internal harm associated with violent encounters. Thus, strategic silencing is a means to stay safe, to not draw attention to self and to cope. This enables young women to get on with life. While a successful strategy for some, it effectively silences the experiences of young women, luring themselves and others into thinking there is no risk or impact. Yet the impacts of violence exist barely below the surface. Given space to talk and reflect, many recounted the ways in which – 'it sticks with you', 'it was traumatising', 'I can still see it to this day', 'it's messed up'.

Discussion and conclusion

> ' … And we didn't speak on this, didn't dwell on it, but of course, along with others we imbibed the day-by-day, the drip-by-drip, on-the-street effects of it … ' (*Milkman*, Anna Burns 2018)

In adopting a gender analysis that forefronts age, this paper has surfaced the multiple ways in which young women experience paramilitary violence in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. In disrupting knowledge about violence it is evident that they, like their male counterparts, know, see, hear, and feel violence, or the threat of it, on a regular basis. Some had been victims of intimidation, verbal and physical violence in ways not dissimilar to many young men. Others pointed to the less discussed nature of gender-based sexual violence that some were subjected to. More broadly, young women experienced and carried the pains of violence beyond that meted out on their bodies. Yet, a narrow focus and traditional masculinist understandings of violence have overshadowed these experiences. They have silenced them by omission and the creation of a hierarchy of violence and harm in which paramilitary violence, and its impacts, are more commonly understood as physical and visible.

Bringing young women to the fore not only illuminates their previously undocumented experiences but provides a broader lens to understand the wider impacts of violence on all. Adjusting how we define and analyse violence can bring to light experiences less considered, and pains that are deep and enduring. An appreciation of the 'sensed experiences' of violence (Sjorberg 2018) reveals not only the multiple ways in which individuals are touched by violence, but the weight of knowing, seeing, hearing, and feeling violence. A weight that perhaps only becomes clear to young women through recounting experiences they have had little opportunity to talk about.

What the telling also reveals is how young women have learned to silence themselves. Structures and cultures exist that produce and maintain silence around violence. The consequences of speaking out are well known and silence is maintained coercively. Reflecting the cultural understanding and hierarchy of violence, young women have learned to normalise their experiences as no different to most in their communities. But also as less

significant or painful than those of young men and previous generations who experienced violence 'worse'. Strategically silencing their experiences, effectively writing them off and affording them less status than those of others, appeared to be a form of self-preservation. While this may be a means of coping day-to-day, their accounts demonstrated deep hurt and sadness, sometimes anger and resentment. Emotions that require recognition and validation. Avoidance, denial and silence are recognised coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma experienced during war and violent conflict (Danieli 1998; Winter 2010). Patterns of silence, internalisation and numbing pain have been identified across generations in Northern Ireland, suggesting culturally transmitted coping mechanisms (Downes, Harrison, and Curran 2013; McAlister, Corr, and Dwyer forthcoming). How young women deal with paramilitary violence may be a contemporary manifestation of this.

Young women are often absent from war and conflict studies which adopt a gender lens. It is the adoption of an intersectional gender lens which considers age that brings their experiences into focus. Intersectionality makes 'visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it' (Phoenix 2006, 187). It is a reminder to 'attend' to those 'who are absent' (Okolosie 2014, 94). The experiences of young women may be overlooked due to the temporal nature, and subordinate position, of youth. Therefore attending to or foregrounding age as a significant factor is necessary in ensuring that the voices of young women are not subsumed within academic research and feminist interest. In this article, we have demonstrated how the relative powerlessness of youth and gender combine to invisibilise young women's experiences. We illustrate the importance of uncovering and giving voice to young women's experiences of violence in their own right. Experiences that have been silenced silently (Matheisen 2004), through lack of attention and common assumptions about the meaning and victims of violence, as well as coercively and culturally. This silence is compounded by lack of services, mechanisms and platforms to voice their experiences, policies and programmes that recognise, reflect and attend to them.

Applying a broader lens to understand violence, and an intersectional approach that incorporates age brings young women's experiences from the margins into focus. It begins to disrupt the cycle which has historically pushed them to the edges – limited knowledge; limited political interest; limited public understanding; limited policy; limited resources – a cycle of invisibility. Future research needs to engage *deliberately* with young women, and young women need to be provided with space to talk about, reflect on and make sense of their own experiences. These need to be recognised as significant by others in order to acknowledge their pain as legitimate pain. Only then will young women understand their experiences to be as valid and worthy of attention, focus or concern as those of others.

Notes

1. Kneecappings are gunshot wounds or assaults to the lower limb/s, generally knees, shins or ankles.
2. Appointments are processes whereby individuals are summonsed to meet with members of a paramilitary group to receive a threat, beating or shooting. To not attend will mean the consequences are elevated.

3. Young people regularly noted one of the positive aspects of paramilitaries within their communities is that they 'get rid of paedophiles' (Oran)
4. 'Tout' was a term associated with police and army informants during the Conflict. It has remained in everyday use to refer to perceptions of those who report crime to, or interact with, the police.

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