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Gendered Violence, Religion and UK-based Anti-Abortion Activism

Sarah-Jane Page, Aston University

Pam Lowe, Aston University

Abstract

The United Nations view access to abortion as a fundamental human right. Yet increasingly in the UK, religiously-motivated activists undertake public displays opposing abortion, often outside abortion clinics, and precipitated through international campaigns like *40 Days for Life* (Lowe and Page forthcoming). Activists see their actions as an essential intervention; some explicitly frame this as a form of help. But examining this from the perspective of how bodies are gendered and regulated in the public sphere raises questions regarding whether this is a form of harassment, and therefore gendered violence. This article is based on a UK ethnography. Using Kelly's (1988) continuum of violence thesis, we examine whether this activism constitutes gendered violence, examining two different activities – prayer and graphic images. Despite these activities being distinct and contrasting, we argue that both should be understood as part of a continuum of violence, causing harm to those seeking abortion services.

Key words: Prayer, graphic images, Virgin Mary, abortion, motherhood, continuum of violence

Introduction

In the UK, active opposition to abortion is overwhelmingly Christian, and anti-abortion activism is frequently organised around religious displays (Lowe and Page forthcoming). Anti-abortion activists

typically identify as Roman Catholic, and are usually very conservative in their religious practice, patterned by regular church attendance and strict adherence to Church teaching (Lowe and Page forthcoming). For example, *40 Days for Life* is a bi-annual prayer-based initiative which started in Texas in the USA in 2004, and where followers gather outside of clinics for a 40 day stretch, to pray for up to 12 hours a day. While the initiative is understood as ecumenical, encouraging participation from across Christian traditions, in the UK context, these prayer vigils are typically routed through Catholic imagery and prayer cycles. Similarly, prayer groups such as *Helpers of God's Precious Infants* centralise their practice around the Virgin Mary. A smaller number of activists emerge from conservative evangelical perspectives, though they are less likely to be involved in prayer vigils, and are more likely to display graphic imagery. For example, the *Centre for Bioethical Reform* see graphic imagery as the key mechanism through which to convey their message, and alter public opinion on abortion. They are also more likely to convey potent visual campaigns such as likening abortion to slavery (see Lowe and Page [forthcoming], where slavery utilised as an activist trope is analysed in more detail). Their activism is also more diverse, now more typically taking place in city centres than at clinic sites. In this article we focus solely on activism at sites where women would seek abortion services. Overall, such initiatives have grown in the UK, with campaigns like *40 Days for Life* giving grassroots activists a broad template for activism (e.g. providing activists with particular slogans, prayers and signs). Despite an increase in activism, activists themselves constitute a small minority of their religious communities, concentrated within more conservative circles.¹

The majority of the British public accept abortion and anti-abortion activism outside clinics is widely condemned by abortion providers, politicians and the mainstream press (Lowe and Page forthcoming). In general, there is strong support for the imposition of bufferzones around abortion

¹ Historically, militant-style campaigns in the UK have generated little support. For example, *Operation Rescue* was formed in the US in the late 1980s and sought to blockade clinics to precipitate their closure (Youngman, 2003). When *Operation Rescue* made similar attempts in the UK, there was miniscule support; even the major UK-based anti-abortion groups denounced the campaign. It therefore proved to be a failure in the context of the UK (Lowe and Page forthcoming).

services – to prevent activism from taking place in the immediate area. To date, however, campaigns for national legislation have not been successful with few legally-enforceable bufferzones in place. Central to this issue is the question as to whether the activities of anti-abortion activists constitute harassment of women². In the UK, physical violence from anti-abortion activists is rare; the majority of behaviours used to deter abortions outside clinics are prayer, ‘pavement counselling’, and the use of images. This article will argue that rather than dismissing some or all of these activities as a benign religious practice, the behaviour of anti-abortion activists needs to be understood as part of a broader pattern of gendered violence. It builds on previous work identifying clinic activism as a form of gendered street harassment, but here, we use Kelly’s (1988) idea of the *continuum of violence* to deepen our understandings of how even silent prayer needs to be understood as abusive. This article will initially examine the contours of gendered violence, explaining the concept of the continuum of violence, followed by an articulation of our understanding of anti-abortion activism as a form of violence, with existing research demonstrating harms to service users. This is followed by a methodological account, before exploring our two data themes of graphic images and prayer. We end with a concluding discussion.

Gendered Violence

As feminists have long recognised, gendered violence cannot be fully understood by simplistically focusing on specific incidents and/or blaming it on poor behaviour by individual perpetrators. Instead, gendered violence should be recognised as a pattern of exercising power and control by perpetrators (Kelly and Westmarland 2016; Radford, Kelly, et al. 1996). This understanding encompasses more than just physical manifestations. Ramazanoglu (1987) notes how violence is not necessarily overt, and involves a wide range of behaviours – involving insults, jokes, and comments –

² We recognise that not all abortion seekers identify as women. However as gender essentialism is central to anti-abortion activism we are using ‘women’ for clarity.

therefore taking discursive forms. More recently, Stark (2007) outlined coercive control in domestic abuse as the abusive micro-management of the everyday, where power is exercised through monitoring what women wear or how they manage everyday tasks such as childcare and cleaning. Stark (2007) argues that this pattern of private control has emerged precisely because women have gained more public freedoms, in areas such as work and education. Thus, at an interpersonal level, abuse is associated with the regulation of feminine performance (Anderson 2009; Stark 2007) and can include reproductive control in which enforced pregnancy is more common than coercion to have a termination (Grace and Anderson 2016).

Alongside domestic abuse, gendered violence threats outside of the home have a limiting impact on women's lives. Research has long identified how women routinely consider personal safety when navigating public space, and these precautions shape their public lives (Logan 2015; Stanko 1995), with the ever-present fear of violence working 'as a form of social control' (Hanmer and Maynard 1987, 6). To fully understand these mechanisms of control, we need to recognise a *continuum of violence*. As Kelly (1988, 39) argues, violence involves damage to the self, which may be physical, emotional, psychological and/or material. It may violate the body, mind or trust, but the violence denies the will and autonomy of the victim. Exploring gendered violence as a continuum allows women to understand their experiences by 'showing how "typical" and "aberrant" male behaviour shade into one another' (1988, 75). It allows consideration of complexity and ubiquity, moving away from debates about prevalence and severity, in order to highlight how the everydayness of abuse is the lived reality of many women's lives and inseparable from gendered inequality more broadly (Kelly 2011). We will argue that by situating public anti-abortion activism within this broader context of gendered street harassment, and foregrounding the control it seeks over bodily autonomy, discursive violence is enacted. Here, we focus on two different kinds of activism typically understood as being at differing ends of the spectrum (prayer and graphic images) to emphasise that even seemingly innocuous forms of anti-abortion practice cause harm.

Theorising anti-abortion activism as violence

The association between anti-abortion activism and violence is generally focused on extreme events such as the murders and assaults of abortion clinic staff, or attacks on their premises (e.g. invasion, vandalism or arson). In the US, Cohen and Connon (2015) documented the diverse ways in which abortion service providers have to alter their lives due to the serious and life-threatening action from some anti-abortion activists. Jefferis (2011) has shown that anti-abortion terrorism is largely about unity of purpose, thus commitment to the cause, rather than specific organisational affiliation. Anti-abortion activists who kill or use other violent measures often justify their violence as a moral act to prevent a greater immoral one – as they see it, the murder of innocents. As Jefferis explains:

If good Christians are called to prevent others from committing murder, and if abortion is murder, then good Christians are called by God to prevent abortion by any means necessary (2011,135)

While in the UK, ‘any means necessary’ does not include the same level of extreme violence, the underlying rationale for anti-abortion activism remains the same. Moreover, as Shearer (2021) argues, anti-abortion activism stems from ‘sacred surety’; a certainty that God has directed their actions.³

As we argue (Lowe and Page forthcoming), the practices of public anti-abortion activism outside abortion clinics in the UK are diverse and multi-layered. While the overall mission is to dissuade women from abortion, the actions performed vary, depending on the preferences of the individuals themselves, even when they align with a particular organisation or campaign. However, as we have

³ Unlike other contexts like the US, UK-based anti-abortion activists typically have little traction in the public sphere. For example, in 2017, the Conservative Member of Parliament, Jacob Rees-Mogg, stated on television that he was ‘completely opposed’ to abortion due to his religious beliefs, a view that was considered extreme by the broader public.

demonstrated elsewhere (Lowe and Hayes, 2019), it is the *presence* of anti-abortion activists outside clinics, rather than their actions, that is central to understanding why this is gendered harassment. While the impact on abortion seekers varied, from experiencing this as an unwelcome intrusion into a personal matter, to having serious concerns regarding safety, a major factor was its unpredictability. In other words, to gain entry to a clinic, women needed to navigate past people whose main intention is to prevent abortions; what they might do to stop them was unknown.

Kelly's (1988) analysis showed that central to understanding the continuum of violence is a focus on issues of power and control and the connectedness of the abuse to the denial of autonomy. Within this perspective, there are three key elements which we emphasise here. First, a need to consider the broad spectrum of abuse, and not just physical violence; second, the impact on those targeted rather than the *intention* of the actor; and finally, the connections to broader gender inequality. We argue that this framework illustrates the actions of anti-abortion activists as violence.

The first element is the extent to which anti-abortion activists outside clinics cause emotional, psychological or physical harm. As we have described elsewhere (Lowe and Hayes, 2019), a major form of distress is emotional, with women commonly describing their experiences of being watched and/or approached as upsetting, intimidating, uncomfortable, and causing distress or stress. Typical examples are (from Hayes and Lowe 2015):

I was approached by a lady handing out leaflets which I refused (...) She continued to harass me by constantly talking at me about making the right choices. I felt very upset as I was already in a vulnerable and emotional state.

It wasn't pleasant seeing protesters outside. Did make me feel stressed (...) made me feel more uneasy, going into clinic, extremely intimidating

When arriving people were outside with signs, it made me scared to come in and was physically shaking

Although there may not be physical violence, it is clear that the presence of anti-abortion activists is problematic, especially when a key element of the campaigns is for complete strangers to publicly intrude on a private decision.

As we have previously shown, the unsolicited intrusion by anti-abortion activists breaches the norms of civil inattention – this is the social rule regarding how strangers interact in public – i.e., strangers only minimally acknowledge each other, and largely display indifference (Lowe and Hayes 2019). As much research has shown, women are more likely to experience a breach of civil inattention in public spaces. While attention has often been on sexual issues, to be gendered street harassment, there does not have to be an explicit sexual element (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021; Kelly 1988; Logan 2015). The key issue is that street harassment involves unwanted intrusion into women's everyday lives that emerge from, or is connected to, judgements about women's bodies and/or behaviour. Thus, when anti-abortion activists take a public stance against abortion at clinic sites – so strangers seeking to publicly comment or intrude in the personal decisions of women seeking abortion – it is not surprising that this intrusion elicits fear or distress. It is clear that being purposely watched by strangers when approaching an abortion clinic is an unpleasant and unnerving experience for many women (Lowe and Hayes 2019, Foster et al 2013). Moreover, the harms of street harassment need to be understood as part of the cumulative impact of gendered violence (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021). Hence, it is important to consider the totality of experiences rather than any specific incident.

Secondly, as Kelly (1988) has outlined, regardless of the various forms that violation can take, the central point is that it is not the intentions of perpetrators that makes it abuse, but the impact it has on the target. As we will demonstrate, anti-abortion activists believe their actions to be generally helpful and often argue that any accounts of upset stem from an abortion decision, rather than a result of activism. Yet, whatever form the activism outside clinics takes, it is understood as intrusion by clinic users because it entails the 'critical unwanted scrutiny [of women] similar to other unwanted street encounters' (Lowe and Hayes 2019, 331). Women's status is being scrutinized in

the public sphere and at a very private healthcare moment. The denial by anti-abortion activists that their actions are harmful is similar to the minimising or rejection of harm perpetrated in other forms of street harassment.

Kelly (1988) has argued that men who leer, catcall, proposition, or simply comment on the appearance of women in public spaces are likely to see their behaviour as being friendly or harmless, yet this is not how women experience it. She argues that 'By defining harassment as normal, men justify their behaviour and when it is challenged are able to dismiss (read redefine) women's perceptions' (1988, 104). This denial of the impact of their behaviour is thus similar to the anti-abortion activists' insistence that they are offering support, dismissing any claim that it is harassment (Lowe and Hayes 2019; Lowe and Page forthcoming). Indeed, in the case of a clinic in Ealing, staff from the local council investigating the harassment were mistaken for abortion seekers and directly experienced problematic interactions from anti-abortion activists (Ealing Council, 2018). However, in other interactions with anti-abortion organisations who organised the activities outside this clinic, they had denied that these behaviours were permitted. Thus in the case of both street harassment and anti-abortion activism, there is a disjuncture between action and interpretation.

Research indicates a range of responses to street harassment (Fleetwood 2019; Wise and Stanley 1987). Although much of the resistance, such as non-engagement or witty verbal ripostes, has previously been dismissed as a 'small gesture', they should be considered a self-defence mechanism (Fleetwood 2019,1724). In line with this, we suggest that the examples we articulate elsewhere (Lowe and Hayes 2019) regarding resistance to anti-abortion activists such as ignoring them, politely refusing a leaflet or even throwing it back at the activists, could be considered similarly. Moreover, perpetrators often see attempts to curtail their behaviour in terms of unnecessary aggression and an affront to their freedoms. Ramazanoglu (1987) notes how those who challenge male aggression are themselves perceived as violent and radical. Meanwhile, Lowe and Page (forthcoming) note how counter-demonstrators who come to clinics to oppose the behaviour of anti-abortion activists are

construed by anti-abortion activists as angry radicals. Furthermore, any attempt at imposing a bufferzone is seen as a limit on their freedom of speech, disregarding the feelings of those seeking abortion services.

The final issue to be considered is how the harassment relates to gendered inequalities more broadly. Women's status in the public sphere is already undermined as the public sphere has been constructed as a white male heterosexual space. Public space is a place where women are continually judged, aptly demonstrated through the way in which women unaccompanied by another male have traditionally been understood as sex workers or 'loose women' and ripe for targeting (Lowe and Hayes 2019; Pain 2001; Skeggs 1999; Wise and Stanley 1987). As Fileborn and O'Neill have shown, street harassment, whether directly sexual or not, is 'deeply implicated in the (re)production of gendered power relations and their spatial manifestation' (2021,4). It is a form of gendered control which passes judgement on women's bodies and behaviour, and, due to the often necessary adoption of safety strategies, limits their autonomy.

Research has previously demonstrated the harms experienced by clinic users due to anti-abortion activism, and the gendered basis of this harm (Lowe and Hayes 2019). The continuum of violence (Kelly 1988) approach shows the connections between forms of intrusions, without assuming linearity or seriousness, and outlines their reproduction of gender power relationships. Following our outline of the methodological approach, we will use two examples, graphic images and prayer practices, to explore this in more detail, illustrating anti-abortion activism as harassment.

Methodology

This project is a five-year ethnography (starting in 2015) examining UK abortion activism. It comprised observations and interviews with those involved in activism in public spaces, including 30 abortion clinics across the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) which were observed

on multiple occasions for one-two hours. To protect the identities of those involved in anti-abortion activism, we do not specify precise locations. However, in England, we make geographical distinctions between the North (counties such as Yorkshire and Lancashire), the Midlands (counties such as Nottinghamshire, West Midlands, Leicestershire), the East (counties such as Hertfordshire and Norfolk), the South East (incorporating areas such as Greater London, Hampshire, Sussex) and the South West (including Dorset, Gloucestershire and Devon). The data include our observational field notes, in-situ interviews with activists, interview transcripts with those who agreed to an in-depth interview, photographs of material objects (e.g. signs), public statements made by activists and anti-abortion organisations including social media, analysis of accounts given by service users on their experiences of anti-abortion activists, and other public documents. As we present data, we make a distinction between these materials.

Anti-abortion activists in situ at clinic and hospital sites are typically older, white, and include women and men. Most volunteer their time; only a tiny minority are paid to be there by anti-abortion groups (for example, in court documents it emerged that Good Counsel Network employed some staff at very specific sites – see *Dulgheriu & Orthova vs London Borough of Ealing* 2018). Typically, activists will arrive for a one-to-two hour slot, and may bring their own materials with them for display, such as signs, rosary beads, prayer cards and foetal models. The numbers vary, but between two and four participants for a given period is usual. The varied combinations of individuals result in different kinds of interactions occurring, even at the same geographical site; for one hour, those in the vicinity of the clinic may be approached with leaflets, yet for the next hour, the prayer may be insular and silent, with no attempts at engagement at all. At clinic sites, forms of prayer are the bedrock activity, especially in England, Scotland and Wales, though at some locations, there are groups who also deploy graphic images of aborted fetuses. The latter is more common in Northern Ireland. Those engaging solely in prayer do not necessarily agree with graphic images, further illustrating the diversity of anti-abortion practices (see Lowe and Page forthcoming).

We obtained ethics approval from our university, but the ethical complexities were in evidence throughout the project duration. For example, we were not necessarily welcome as academic observers at sites of activism. Not all activists wanted to talk to us, with prayer itself understood as a sacred activity that should not be interrupted (Page and Lowe 2021). For those activists whose main approach was prayer, we always took care to approach when there was a break. Nevertheless, there were multiple occasions when prayer was used as a reason to close down our research endeavours (Page and Lowe 2021). Yet short conversations with activists were often revealing, adding much to the data from those who generously gave us a longer interview. Activists were also more motivated to answer questions about the significance of various material objects they had with them than questions about why they were there. We sought to engage with activists in a personable and professional manner, with the aim of seeking their detailed thoughts and perspectives. We have used pseudonyms throughout and we have taken care regarding geographical descriptors to maintain the confidentiality of activists.

Here, we have selectively focused on the display of graphic images in the vicinity of a healthcare facility, as well as the prayer practices of activists at clinic sites, as these are typically perceived at different ends of the harassment spectrum. We thematically analysed the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), with codes generated first, followed by broader themes. Here the codes of graphic images and prayer were utilised to inform our analysis and discussion.

Graphic images: foetal-centric ‘guilt-trips’

Displays of graphic images⁴ outside abortion clinics are usually positioned so that they are impossible for those seeking services to avoid. The positioning will vary depending on the specific geography of the clinic site, but frequently they will be adjacent to an entrance, so that service users need to walk

⁴ Here, we use graphic images to mean images which display disembodied fetuses.

right past them, generating maximum engagement. Only a tiny number of groups use graphic images, yet this tactic is often highlighted in discussions of harassment. In a South Eastern city centre, a group of anti-abortion activists assembled outside a small health centre which predominately provides GP services. One of their consulting rooms is used on a part-time basis by an abortion service provider. The anti-abortion activists that appear weekly at this location regularly display graphic images of abortions. Sometimes they have large banners (approximately 2 m²) that are mounted on a metal frame, whereas on other days they have large placards (approximately 1 x 0.5 m²) with a variety of dismembered or blooded fetuses. Often the pictures will be labelled with a foetal stage, such as 11 weeks. This particular organisation dates pregnancy differently so the foetal images appear a couple of weeks more developed than by the standard pregnancy dating method. While this information is available on their website, it is not made obvious at their displays. In general terms, as pregnancy advances, public opinion becomes more critical of abortion (Lee and Ingham 2010). By dating the images differently, it is likely that they are hoping to increase levels of discomfort or distress felt by those encountering the images.

In the case of graphic images, there is no question about the intentions of the anti-abortion activists. They usually readily admit that the images cause distress, and this is why they show them. They argue that the graphic images are needed to 'educate' people about the 'reality' of abortion. They argue that abortion is generally misunderstood and abortion service providers deliberately mislead their potential clients. As *Centre for Bioethical Reform* explained:

abortion photo signs are a consumer protection initiative intended to show women outside the clinics what (*an abortion service provider*) will do to them and their children inside their clinics. [They do] not want [their] potential clients to see the horror of abortion. Abortion is disturbing because it is an act of violence that kills a baby. That's why pictures of it are upsetting. Unless women see these upsetting pictures, they cannot give fully informed

consent to this procedure that is so horrific that [they want] no one actually to see it
(transcribed from public online materials)

This tactic thereby elicits a disturbing image to convey an act that the anti-abortion activists understand as violent. The activists thereby forge an alignment between the image and their perception of abortion, so that a violent and disturbing image comes to represent the singular (but contested) understanding that abortion is a form of violence (e.g. see Millar 2017 for alternative readings of abortion). Their intended goal is for the image to explicitly evoke a visceral reaction. The image is purposefully crafted to cause harm and distress. More broadly, their claim arises from an underlying assumption that all women have been pressured, coerced or duped into having abortions due to an 'abortion culture' in which the humanity of the foetus has been hidden (Lowe and Page 2019). As we will later argue, anti-abortion activists subscribe to traditional essentialised understandings of women as mothers, using both religious and secular messages to try to ensure that women recognise themselves as naturally mothers, and reject abortion (Lowe and Page 2020).

Thus, at the very heart of anti-abortion activism is a targeting of women to prevent a perceived potential failure in their feminine performance. Moreover, because anti-abortion activists believe that motherhood starts at conception, graphic pictures of dead fetuses are supposed to inform women that unless they continue a pregnancy, they are responsible for the demise of their children. This message is repeated in Northern Ireland, where an anti-abortion activist held a clipboard displaying stylised images of the foetus in the womb next to similarly-sized images of disembodied and bloodied fetuses. Alongside, an activist holds a handwritten 'Babies are MURDERED here' sign ('murdered' is written in red, therefore connoting blood). They often emphasise that women can be forgiven by God for having abortions, providing that they are sufficiently repentant. Yet, despite any emphasis on forgiveness, they are still positioned as 'murderers' within these narratives.

Women have long been held responsible for children's welfare, and women who deviate from a position of good motherhood are often culturally sanctioned (Lowe 2016). The judgement that they

are responsible for child 'murder' positions them as especially deviant, contravening social and cultural conceptions of natural feminine behaviour (Seal 2010). Consequently, accusing women of murder is highly offensive, and an attack on their personal integrity. Moreover, this takes place in a context where a need for abortion can be questioned, even by some who generally support it (Weitz 2010). Frequently, abortion seekers already need to justify their decision as 'morally sound' in order to avoid discrediting associations (Hoggart 2017).

Anti-abortion activists also seek to draw others into their campaigns against abortion. For example, it is not uncommon for anti-abortion activists to assemble outside abortion clinics when they are closed, as a deliberate strategy to draw public attention to abortion clinics (Cohen and Connon 2015; Lowe and Hayes 2019). At the South-Eastern clinic, the activists would sometimes present on days that they knew the abortion service was not running. It is likely that the targeting of health facilities on non-abortion clinic days also aims to generate complaints from the wider patient body, in the hope of closing particular abortion services. However, although clinic closures carry symbolic meaning for anti-abortion activists, in England, they do not reduce overall abortion provision. Indeed, as the NHS often contracts out abortion services to third party providers, it is not uncommon for the provider to change at the end of the contract, thereby relocating the service. Thus, the harassment felt by non-abortion patients and staff is unlikely to succeed in reducing abortions overall, but nevertheless seeks to draw in a wider number of people in the mission to exert secondary reproductive coercion by enforcing pregnancy.

Prayer practices: sacrificial motherhood and problematized sexuality

Many activists endorsed prayer as their principal activity because they saw graphic images as too severe an approach, feeling there were better ways to convey their stance, and prayer was a more common practice than graphic images. Therefore, anti-abortion activists did not agree with each

other regarding strategies and tactics, and those who advocated prayer typically endorsed an approach that foregrounded help and support to those seeking abortion, with a desire to avoid being antagonistic or harsh. Prayer was specifically constructed as a benign activity that did not cause harm or distress, and was specifically utilised as a gentler approach to transmit their anti-abortion message (Page and Lowe 2021). In short, this approach was understood as kinder and not invoking any of the forms of violence and distress that typified our discussion of graphic images. However, this was not the way that it was experienced by those who were being prayed for:

People standing at both entrances holding rosary beads. A priest praying with other people nearby. Felt intimidating (Ealing Council, 2018)

Having leaflets shoved in my face disregarding a much thought about decision, and being told I'd be 'prayed' for is an invasion of privacy in my view tantamount to harassment
(service user comment)

Arguably, prayer can take place anywhere, but anti-abortion activists insist on praying at clinic sites, because this is deemed the last opportunity to change minds (Lowe and Page forthcoming). Participants discussed 'bearing witness', such as Rosie, who said that 'It's a way of saying, there's something happening here that we don't think is right. Just being there physically is a way of showing that'. Meanwhile, praying at home or in church was not seen as effective for petitioning God, who is understood as needing to work through individuals directly at the clinic. This presence not only signifies their belief that abortion is wrong, but also indicates their belief that seeking abortion goes against God:

They were praying for the lives of the unborn, and for women having abortions because it was a sin and they needed 'repentance'. They were also praying for the staff involved in abortions and to change hearts and minds in society; this included praying for those against them (researcher field notes, Midlands)

The campaign includes fasting, prayer and public witness. They are looking for ‘the Lord’s help in bringing an end to abortion in our world’ (researcher field notes, South West)

The salience of prayer and its perceived power was rooted in its links to the transcendental. More broadly, prayer is typically constructed as a fundamentally sacred activity where someone is communicating with God (Genova 2015; Giordan 2015), and limiting this was positioned as interfering with an individual’s faith. Much rhetoric around implementing bufferzones at abortion clinics has hinged on the perception that it is banning prayer – with the idea that enacting a bufferzone interferes with one’s rights to practise one’s religion (Page and Lowe 2021). Prayer is typically deemed a cordial activity, especially when it takes private forms and is understood as something helpful to individuals, as a form of comfort and a coping mechanism during challenging circumstances (Giordan 2015). Meanwhile, prayer is also seen as a more favourable activity than other forms of activist behaviour, with even those opposed to activism seeing it as a ‘least worst’ option. One clinic manager who had witnessed activists handing out model foetuses, loud singing and attempts to engage with people by knocking on car windows, was relieved when the activism changed to prayer, as they felt this was less problematic (Page and Lowe 2021). As noted above, however, this is not how it is necessarily perceived by clinic users, who do find silent prayer intrusive (Lowe and Hayes 2019). Nor, as we will discuss later, does it recognise that prayer in public space can be seen as transgressive, because it is deemed out of place (Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2013).

Anti-abortion activists utilised this positivity about prayer to convey it as an uncontroversial and peaceful act, as the following quotes indicate:

Lloyd said that they didn’t want to frighten or intimidate people. He said they were there to help. Mike said it was *prayerful*. It was about praying for the aborted babies and praying for the mothers, and that their position was that they were caring, loving and thoughtful and

not judgmental or hurtful, and with no malice whatsoever (researcher field notes, Scotland, emphasis added)

[W]e are hoping that the prayers comfort. (George, interview, Midlands)

[W]e are there as a prayerful witness. We are not there to chant anything or to harass anybody. (Toby, interview, Midlands)

Mike positioned prayer as the mechanism through which their activism was to be interpreted as non-intimidatory and, instead, a form of support, indicated by use of the term 'prayerful' – prayer utilised as an adjective to indicate its positive connotations. George fundamentally understood his actions as offering comfort, while Toby dismissed any understanding of his activism as a form of harassment. None of these participants would interpret or even understand the idea that their actions cause harm or distress. Because prayer is broadly constructed as something that is helpful, anti-abortion activists mobilised this meaning, to understand their actions only in positive terms. However, anti-abortion activists undermine this construction, especially when it is understood what they are praying *for*. Fr. Paul explained that '[w]e pray for the repentance, conversion and eternal salvation of all those who have been involved in this sin'. Even though the prayer is portrayed as help, it is underpinned by a condemnatory rhetoric which equates seeking an abortion with sinfulness. Prayer is explicitly being undertaken on behalf of others – those involved with abortions are being *prayed for*. But as we see in the aforementioned quotes from clinic users, this can be perceived as an objectionable intervention.

The Virgin Mary was a primary means through which prayer was constructed as a form of goodhearted and benevolent help, rather than harm. The Virgin was understood as a sacred figure who opposed abortion, but who wanted to help women who found themselves in difficult circumstances, given that she, too, had faced an unexpected pregnancy. This feminine offer of help was believed to soften the edges of their campaign, downplaying its underpinning judgements

against women. Rosary beads were a ubiquitous presence at abortion clinic sites where prayer was foregrounded, relevant given that the Rosary centralises Mary. The Rosary has historic legacy, starting in the 14th century, thereby giving the prayer legitimacy (Mitchell 2009). Rosary beads materialised this underlying symbolism; at some sites, activists distributed plastic rosary beads in the colours of baby pink and blue (Lowe and Page forthcoming). These material and embodied factors create a form of sacred claims-making in the public sphere, where heritage and tradition are interwoven to give a definitive message regarding how Christians should perceive abortion – as something fundamentally wrong, thereby implying there is a singular meaning around how abortion is understood by Christians:

Anne told us there is a sequence all the way through from the beginning when the angel told Mary that she was going to be the Mother of God (researcher field notes, North)

Paula explained that they use the Joyful Mysteries⁵ for pro-life work; people write them meditations to think about and if you're praying for something specific like unborn children, they will write meditations that you can use in prayer whilst you're saying your prayers. So this is the anguish of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane about unborn life and as a Catholic she said she finds abortion very difficult as Jesus came into the world as a baby, so if that isn't a sign from our creator about the sacred nature of life, she said she didn't know what is (field notes, South West)

A very particular understanding of prayer was therefore being invoked: the Rosary was utilised as a spiritual means to oppose abortion, centred on Mary as a mother, and Jesus entering the world as a baby. Mary's motherhood – and her relationship to Christ – was foregrounded for two reasons. Firstly, Mary was positioned as a powerful intercessor on behalf of the anti-abortion community, with her close relationship to Christ giving her influence – Mary galvanised the power of the prayer;

⁵ The Joyful Mysteries form part of the Rosary

secondly, drawing on Mary foregrounded her mothering identity, and this became the aspirational model for women. Women were fundamentally understood as mothers by activists; becoming a mother was perceived as a woman's true calling (Lowe and Page 2019). The inevitability of women's maternal identity is foregrounded in sentiments such as Ann's, that the angel 'told' Mary she would become the 'Mother of God'. There is no uncertainty or ambiguity here – Mary is presented as submitting to God's will and accepting her pregnancy status as a sacred duty (Kamitsuka 2019). This is extrapolated to all who are pregnant – like Mary, they should submit to the will of God (as the anti-abortion activists interpret that will), and continue with a pregnancy, whatever the circumstances. Despite an outward message couched in Mary's sacred love, the anti-abortion activist's prayerful message was underpinned by a lack of choice, made more pernicious by rationalising this unflinchingly and inevitably as God's sacred desire. As we discuss elsewhere, other Christians dispute this interpretation of God's intention (Lowe and Page forthcoming).

Jeffrey utilised Mary somewhat differently in his mediated prayer practice, which involved the Virgin as healer of the clinic site itself:

I used to pray, what's called a Hedge of Thorns... There's a story in the Old Testament about Gomer, the prostitute. Her husband is told to marry her, despite knowing she's a prostitute. She goes on misbehaving and so on, but the Lord puts a hedge of thorns around her. I had heard of the technique of praying a hedge of thorns..., I sort of imagined praying a hedge of thorns around the clinic, which would make it difficult for people to get to. That didn't seem right, so I abandoned that. Now I pray, almost like imagining our Blessed Lady being above the clinic. She's praying and she's the Mediatrix of all Graces from heaven. Graces come through her... it's more like that this place slowly is being healed by goodness. Lust kills love, love overcomes lust. (Jeffrey interview)

Jeffrey viewed Gomer's sexuality as inherently threatening and a failure to comply with the expectations of 'appropriate' wifely behaviour. His anxieties over Gomer convey her as sexually

sinful, and indicated Geoffrey's staunch support for regulating sexuality within marriage, and where a wife's faithfulness is assured.

In his prayer practice, Geoffrey parallels the story of Gomer with the hedge of thorns being displaced from the head of the 'prostitute' to the abortion clinic. The hedge of thorns analogy was explicitly aimed at building a prayer barrier around the clinic. For Geoffrey, abortion would also be curtailed by stopping 'immoral' sexual practices - if all sex took place within marriage, it is erroneously understood that abortion would be unnecessary. This is therefore a judgement on what sexual practices are deemed 'appropriate'; controlling and curtailing women's sexuality is therefore valorised. The hedge of thorns can therefore be understood as a coercive prayer practice that attempts to control women's behaviour. Geoffrey then reflected that this may be too severe; he resituated his prayer practice to focus on Mary as healer, explicitly referencing her as being able to overcome lust. But this reinterpretation was still underpinned by his understanding that abortion inevitably causes harm. He was grappling with a battle between lust and purity, with Gomer's 'fallen' woman contrasting with Mary, the 'pure' woman. Implicitly, it is 'the prostitute' who, in Geoffrey's mind, is aligned with the abortion seeker, deemed as being the one in need of healing. While Geoffrey attempted to ameliorate his prayer practices by moving from a position asking for divine intervention to stop access to the clinic, to one focused on healing, his methods still contributed to particular negative understandings of women's sexuality, and the often-utilised dualistic trope in Christianity between 'sinful' sexuality and 'pure' virginity (Furlong 1984). Whichever form of prayer was being imagined, Geoffrey was firm in his belief that abortion was harmful and fundamentally wrong, and a result of women's 'errant' and 'wayward' sexuality.

Overall, anti-abortion prayer practices typically foregrounded clinic users – they were explicitly prayed for, and this was constructed as a helpful intervention for those seeking an abortion. The activists rarely considered that prayer undertaken on behalf of others and without their permission as being unsavoury. Indeed, they do not seek consent to pray, as they do not see it as offensive. This

raises questions of power, authority and control. If one has not been asked to be prayed for, then 'ethical cautions' are raised about the very appropriateness of prayer, emphasising not only the contested nature of prayer, but also how prayer is socially constructed in different contexts (Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2013,193). At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, a decennial gathering of Anglican bishops held at the University of Kent, a bishop from another country with a conservative view of homosexuality tried to exorcise a homosexual demon from the secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (Brown and Woodhead 2016). This exorcism was couched in terms of prayer, with the bishop laying on hands and chanting, 'Father, I pray that you deliver him out of homosexuality, out of gay' (Brown and Woodhead 2016,138). This intervention was clearly unwelcome; the secretary attempted to push away the hands of the bishop, but the bishop continued. Since this incident, greater public awareness has arisen regarding the damaging nature of prayer, for example, the role of prayer in gay conversion 'therapy', with calls to have conversion 'therapy' banned in the UK (Ozanne 2017). Such prayers are therefore understood as causing considerable harm. The notion that prayer is always positive and warm is therefore increasingly being questioned, with context being paramount to determining potential harms, especially regarding who is initiating the prayer and for what purpose (Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2013).

Another important feature to activists is the public nature of the prayers. This public display ensures that their stance opposing abortion is observed and made visible. Yet, prayer can be problematic when it occurs in the public sphere. While individual prayer in privatised settings, mobilised for personal benefit, is considered relatively uncontroversial, as soon as this takes a public character, levels of discomfort increase. This is demonstrated in Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham et al.'s (2013) study of prayer in healthcare settings, with debates emerging regarding whether it was appropriate for prayer to be part of a nurse's professional role. As indicated above, in the context of abortion clinics and hospitals, those seeking abortion have not asked to be prayed for, and instead interpret this behaviour as a form of unwelcome intrusion, intimidation and conveying a negative judgement on them for seeking abortion (Lowe and Hayes 2019; Page and Lowe 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined two different kinds of anti-abortion activism from opposite ends of the spectrum – graphic images and prayer – situating both as harm-generating activities that cause distress at sites of abortion provision (Lowe and Hayes 2019)⁶. Many observers implicitly understand graphic imagery to be problematic in the public sphere, with prayer conveyed as less harmful. This is because prayer has dominantly been constructed as benign, sympathetic and beneficial. However, along with other examples of prayer such as that related to lesbian and gay conversion ‘therapy’, we seek to question this assumption, and to dig deeper into the purposes and motivations underpinning anti-abortion prayer, fully considering its impact on those encountering it. The goals underpinning prayer among anti-abortion activists typically foreground the curtailing of freedom and choice and emphasise highly constraining understandings of women’s bodily autonomy and assumptions about their status as mothers. In addition, clinic users find any form of activism – no matter how silent and unobtrusive – as invasive (Lowe and Hayes 2019).

Whether visually represented or formatted discursively, anti-abortion activism has the identical goal to dissuade women from abortion, at the very moment that abortion is sought. Thus, it is an explicit form of reproductive coercion. Whatever form the activism takes, certain judgements about the ‘wrongness’ of abortion are articulated, situating those seeking abortion as misguided, sinful or even murderers, and encouraging stigma and/or shame. This occurs at a heightened moment, and maximises the opportunity to cause distress, due to its location. Although reactions to activists by clinic users generate varied responses, the capacity to cause harm is high. As we have demonstrated, for some activists, the cultivation of such feelings in those seeking services is their *raison d’être*.

Graphic images of aborted foetuses are utilised as a shock tactic to ‘wake’ people from their inertia and recognise the ‘reality’ of abortion. But such displays are intensely resisted by local communities,

⁶ For more detail regarding the whole spectrum of anti-abortion activities, please see Lowe and Page forthcoming.

deemed distasteful not only to a broader public, but harmful towards children. One clinic was situated next to a park; parents frequently walked past the activism site with their children. This was a key argument in enabling the implementation of a bufferzone. The undesirability of children seeing such images contributed to wider concerns about campaigns not only being impactful for clinic users, but also affecting the quality of life of local residents. In these debates, it was relatively straightforward to situate graphic images as inherently harmful; indeed, this viewpoint was galvanised when other anti-abortion groups distanced themselves from such tactics, instead emphasising their ‘peaceful prayer’. Anti-abortion activists positioned prayer as fully acceptable by mobilising the idea of prayer as helpful and benign and setting prayer apart as a distinct and different kind of activism. Yet this is not the way it is experienced by many service users (Lowe and Hayes 2019). Indeed, the denial of the impact of their activities is consistent with other forms of street harassment.

Street harassment often assumes a level of intimacy with the target, and, like other forms of gendered abuse, focuses on policing appropriate femininity (Fileborn and O’Neill 2021; Logan 2015; Kelly 1988). A central motivation of anti-abortion activism is their belief in distinct gendered roles and a desire for retraditionalisation (Lowe and Page forthcoming). This includes the construction of all women as mothers who should naturally sacrifice their lives for their children, whether born, in utero, or not yet conceived. Those seeking abortion were perceived by anti-abortion activists as not being properly aligned with the sacrificial expectation for women to always be primed for motherhood. At many sites, the Virgin Mary was *the* key icon of the anti-abortion campaign, in an attempt to soften the message. But this was underpinned by highly negative judgements about abortion being wrong and sinful, therefore making those seeking an abortion culpable. Utilising Mary enabled activists to valorise sacrificial motherhood, which complemented their essentialised understandings of gender and the perceived ‘proper’ role of women; women should always choose to continue with a pregnancy no matter the consequences.

Forms of gendered essentialism therefore underpin the justification for street harassment. Although the control sought by anti-abortion activists is not through the sexual objectification that often occurs in other forms of street harassment, it is enacted through an essentialised gendered lens: that of seeing all women as sacrificial mothers. Whereas sexual harassment is often naturalized and justified because it is seen as a result of innate biological 'facts' – where men sexually pursuing women is due to their 'hunter instincts' – here, a different kind of essentialism is enacted, and the harassment by anti-abortion activists is justified on the basis of the 'fact' of women's assumed motherhood, and an understanding that women are 'meant to' be mothers. To interfere with this destabilizes biological processes, and is considered as going against God's will. While street harassment is typically researched through the lens of sexual harassment, the case of anti-abortion activism acts as a reminder that gendered harassment takes many different forms, and can include women as perpetrators.

Our argument uses Kelly's (1988) concept of the continuum of violence, looking at three elements in particular: the level of distress, the impact not the intention, and the positioning within wider gender inequalities. In line with this, whatever forms of activism are engaged, anti-abortion activism can be understood as abuse within this framework. While graphic images are more readily understood by the general public as a problem, we argue that in the case of anti-abortion activism, silent prayer too causes distress and is a form of harassment that engenders harm, and therefore must be taken seriously. Prayer was utilised as a form of sacred judgement against those seeking abortion services, and can therefore be better understood as part of a continuum of harassment, rather than as a distinctive and separate behaviour that was helpful and benign. Although graphic images are often called out as such, we have located specific examples of 'graphic prayer', which, although 'unseen', had particular preoccupations and intentions which were infused with the bodily control of women. The violence embedded within anti-abortion activism is therefore not only visualised, but also takes discursive and embodied forms, invoking various subject positions of women, as 'murderers' or as 'sinners'. Despite anti-abortion activists using ameliorating language to

describe their actions, such as foregrounding their desire to help and support women, this is not how their actions are perceived by those being targeted, and instead, even seemingly benign forms of anti-abortion activism outside clinics can firmly be understood as harassment. Indeed, the interpretations of the anti-abortion activists' behaviour differs markedly between those at the receiving end and those undertaking the activism, but as Kelly (1988) argues, the voices of those on the receiving end of harassment must be prioritised. The inherent judgement about women's bodies and behaviour reproduces gendered inequalities within the public sphere, forcing unwanted encounters with activists opposing a legitimate healthcare decision in places where buffer zones are absent. This is a clear power imbalance, and evidence that gendered power inequalities continue to exist.

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