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LOYALIST WOMEN HAVE A VOICE – BUT WHO'S LISTENING?

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Abstract

The United Kingdom is on its 4th National Action Plan for Women, Peace & Security, while Ireland is currently delivering its 3rd National Action Plan (which references Northern Ireland). The year 2020 marks two decades of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace & Security, however, the CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) Committee's Concluding Observations last year expressed concern that the UK Government has not implemented the principles of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland. The women's sector in Northern Ireland has worked with the Stormont All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325, but the new agreement 'New Decade, New Approach' (2020) fails to mention the word 'women'. Notwithstanding this, there is a marked absence of voices of women in the North Antrim, Londonderry & East Tyrone areas about what they feel – about past, future and current issues, as well as their hopes and fears. This chapter will focus primarily on reflecting the voice of Loyalist/Unionist women from towns and rural hinterlands. It recognises the value of women in the community and how, despite being a silent voice in the public realm, they play an important role in shaping narrative, understanding and perception. Any strategies concerning the application of the principles of UNSCR 1325 to Northern Ireland need to take account of their concerns, views and potential to influence future trends in loyalism and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

KEYWORDS: *women, loyalism, equality, Northern Ireland, peace building*

Introduction

So, what does discussion of Women, Peace and Security mean for women in the housing estates and rural communities of North Antrim, Londonderry and East Tyrone? Very little, at present, as few are accustomed to expressing views in public about how they experienced conflict, and even fewer will have heard of UNSCR 1325. For many women from the P/U/L (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) community, 'peace' means not having to worry about whether family members arrive home safely, and 'security' means having enough money to settle the grocery bill. They do hold views about their place in society; their sense of identity; and their hopes for a society that offers a better future for their children, but these views are rarely given public voice.

The existence of the United Kingdom 4th National Action Plan for Women, Peace & Security or the Irish 3rd National Action Plan (which references Northern Ireland), means little. Similarly, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and

Security and CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) is rarely known. Some may hear about the work of the Women's Sector in Northern Ireland working with the Stormont All-Party Group on UNSCR 1325, or realise that the new 'New Decade, New Approach' (2020) agreement failed to mention the word 'women'. For many women concerned about everyday perceptions of 'peace' and 'security' these debates seem a world away, whilst for P/U/L women there is a feeling that their sense of identity finds little room in such discussions.

Clayton states that 'however the 'concept of identity' has been formed it has 'peculiar' relevance where groups are in competition' (Clayton 1988, 8). The cohesion and importance of identity which acts as a social construct in contested geographical areas of the globe is particularly felt with the P/U/L community. This, Baker states becomes a hothouse as:

> 'Group consciousness or identity occurs when a group recognises itself as processing unique attributes that distinguish it from others… It assumes greater saliency when groups compete for scarce resources, power or other desired goods, but group awareness also emerges when groups perceive their valued attributes (for example culture, religion, language, identity) threatened by the actions of others, be that threat real or imagined' (Baker 1983, 10–11).

What can be conceived as external pressure form opposing cultures and groups forms an identity that is far less willing to compromise and builds structures of a defensive and martyred nature to justify its view of society.

What is loyalism and how can it be defined?

McAuley states that it is a cultural social identity (2016, 78). This is a communal precept and as such, it brings individuals 'together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (ibid). He suggests five criteria as the building blocks of loyalist identity which include a strong sense of identity of what they are not and as expressing themselves in terms of social and political boundaries such as culture, language, religious bonds, economic, class and political interests, alongside memories and narratives drawn from shared communal experience.

Smithey (2011) takes up the theme of loyalist identity as it relates to the Protestant faith, the British Crown and Ulster/British identity, but focuses on the grassroots loyalist experience and the potential for shift in the manner in which identity is communicated. Shirlow and McEvoy (2008, 4) also highlight the experience of those P/U/L communities most affected by the 1969–1994 conflict, arguing that 'the construction and reproduction of identity remains embedded within notions of territoriality and ethnically defined allegiance,' which may suggest less potential movement than Smithey. Applying this to loyalism, they note how loyalists construct their role in the conflict as one of defence

of both their communities from Republican violence and defence of the constitutional union with Britain (Shirlow & McEvoy 2008, 3). However, in a later work, Shirlow (2012, 199) distinguishes between 'progressive' and 'regressive' Loyalism and decries commentators who unilaterally dismiss loyalism as inherently reactionary.

And where are the women?

If loyalism is grounded in emotion and sentiment related to the community's sense of Britishness, and the need to defend this 'place-centred' value system (Shirlow 2012, 53), then the question as to the position of women within this community is pertinent. The reality is that women played major roles in the Ulster Defence Regiment, the RUC and in loyalist paramilitary organisations, but their experience and their voice has either been side-lined or silenced by an overly male lens that dominates. Susan McKay (2000) did interview some loyalist women in her study on Northern Protestants, but unfortunately in a manner that many feel was overly negative. McKay aside, Lehner observes that 'it is notable that the majority of literature on Northern Ireland and transitional justice mechanisms have remained remarkably gender-blind…' (Lehner 2011, 67). This tendency is even more pronounced when in the case of the role of loyalist women, a point noted by Ward in her study 'Unionism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland: From Tea-Makers to Political Action' (Ward 2006).

There has been a growth in academic studies on gender, conflict and peacebuilding. Ashe applied a gender lens to the 'ethno-national' conflict in Northern Ireland in 2008 (Ashe 2008), building on the idea that the experience of war/violent conflict is gendered as evidenced by the disparity of treatment of men and women, with women being trivialised as a direct consequence of the accentuated masculinities attached to war. This point was further elaborated by Sjoberg (Sjoberg, NNN) in a global context, and by Ashe and Harland (2013) as applied to Northern Ireland, where the dominance of conflict-related 'troubling masculinities' augmented a more conservative understanding of gender identities. Ashe builds on this perspective in 2019 (Ashe 2019) by suggesting that the new institutions inaugurated under the Belfast Agreement (1998) actually preserve these older conservative narratives. In short, that 'ethno-nationalist' antagonism reinforces the male role as the protectors and defenders of specific 'ethno-national' societal/communal groups.

Despite the Belfast Agreement promising 'the right of women to full and equal political participation', subsequent political culture and arrangements have failed to deliver on this. Hayes and McAllister (2012) and Deiana (2013) both trace how the consocietal political arrangements adopted failed to enhance the voice or representation of women in politics, a point that Potter (2014) and Gilligan (2014) underlined in evidence for the Northern Ireland Assembly. Focusing on the political representation of women, Gilligan drew attention to five barriers – cash (access to); culture (political); care (responsibilities); confidence and candidate selection. McDowell introduces an additional dimension in

that the political culture and institutions 'privileged male interpretations of the past (and, therefore, present)' (2008, 65).

A number of studies have been written on women in the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican communities in Northern Ireland (Aretxaga 1997) and in recent years there has been some attention given to the voice of unionist and loyalist women (Racioppi and O'Sullivan 2000; Ward 2006; McEvoy 2009), however such studies as are available predominantly focus on Belfast, and in some cases, on loyalist women paramilitaries. The limited interest in women's roles in the broader P/U/L tradition is arguably both historic as well as contemporary. Hill (2013) has recorded the high level of female engagement during the time of the Ulster Covenant (1912) – an involvement, that like the current period, has gone largely unrecognised.

This undervaluing of the role of Loyalist/Unionist women is not just a historical discrepancy, it is a contemporised reality for many loyalist women, especially those living outside the main urban areas. This reality is evident in the interviews conducted for this paper. Out of the eight interviews, not one expresses satisfaction with the current peace process. In fact, many feel marginalised and disconnected with a process that a number believe is largely Belfast based and disinterested in their views.

A scan of what loyalist women think in rural north Antrim

The interviews conducted as a pilot exercise given the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic were open-ended, but focused largely on experience of the conflict; attitudes to the peace process; and tentative hopes for the future:

> 'Peace process, it wasn't a ceasefire, was in name only.'
>
> 'Ceasefire was a laugh because it wasn't a ceasefire. It was stage-managed and the IRA had a ceasefire but their people moved into groups and carried on. The peace process was an appeasement for the other side.'
>
> 'Didn't agree with GFA and still doesn't, giving in to Sinn Féin/IRA.'
>
> 'The GFA was meant to be a big thing but it was just another selling of unionism and handing our souls to the devil.'

(Author's interviews 2020)

Such sentiments are not unusual in conversations in rural areas and in the circles that loyalist women move in. There is a strong sense that they have been left behind in a process that privileges the interests of Nationalists/Republicans. One interviewee states that: 'things haven't changed and we are giving in to Sinn Féin; power-sharing isn't working, it's pandering to Sinn Fein' (interviewee 3. 2020). This sense of erosion of their

position and lack of recognition of what they suffered during the conflict, is expressed by interviewee 1 who states that the 'unionist community lost too much because they (IRA), they're now getting their own way with shirts and ties on rather than bombs and bullets'. This opinion resonated in various forms amongst all the interviewees. This is concerning, as over two decades after the Belfast Agreement women feel little, or no, confidence in the peace process that was designed to deliver a new dispensation in Northern Ireland.

The importance of this finding is underlined because these feelings have now entered the psych of rural loyalist women's narrative. This is a narrative that has the potential to become intergenerational in impact, with destabilising influences on peacebuilding and the peace process. Interviewees 4 and 7 expressed dissatisfaction. Interviewee 4 says she 'doesn't think the peace process did what it should have done' and interviewee 7 states 'the peace process hasn't made life any better at all'. Interviewee 6 was despondent, asserting that 'things haven't changed and we are giving in to Sinn Féin; power-sharing isn't working, it's pandering to Sinn Féin'. Overall, the general perception of this group of loyalist women, in the three rural areas, was of a one-sided process that only favoured and facilitated nationalism and republicans.

While it is now evident that the Troubles has had a long-term detrimental effect on the psychological wellbeing of those who experienced it (Muldoon 2004, 456), such impacts are not just personal, they become integral to a community experience when not recognised and addressed. This, in turn, can give rise to inter-generational impacts. Alongside having to come to terms with the legacy of the conflict, what emerged from the interviews was a class dimension, encapsulated in the belief that middle-class concerns about economics was a major factor in Unionist acceptance of a process that would eventually destroy the Unionist/loyalist culture of the women interviewed.

Those interviewed opined that while they could not openly be proud of their P/U/L without it impacting on them, then peace for them or their children was not a reality. Cultural expression was something that they wanted to be proud of but was curtailed by fear of job loss, intimidation, and exclusion. For society to progress, in a peaceful and secure fashion, these fears and the negative consequences of them expressing their identity would have to be confronted.

The women interviewed made a clear distinction between loyalism and unionism. The loyalist women show some contempt for those who they identify as being in a higher economic bracket, who they blame for undermining unionism. Interviewee 2 states '*middle-class unionism doesn't see this*' (the undermining of the union) 'and don't want to side with grassroots loyalism, this is the downfall of unionism.' Interviewee 1 says that 'garden centre types are only worried about money, it's just cash before the sash.' As an extension of this, the women show a distinct lack of trust in politicians generally which leads them to question the democratic process. They indicate that they feel part of an

underclass, underlined by expressions of distrust of social and community structures. 'We have nothing' is a common refrain. There is a sense that they are outsiders, marginalised and dispossessed.

When asked what is needed within their community the interviewees responded:

> Interviewee 2 – 'Would love a woman's programme where issues are discussed throughout and could be continued as groups like that don't exist for women'.
>
> Interviewee 5 – 'We need a women's programmes but not ones that are set up to run down men, one to better yourself as a woman and talk about things like the discussions during this'.
>
> Interviewee 7 – 'Would get involved in a woman's group if it was different from those already there, they are too middle class and clique'.

These women feel let down by a process that they see as both overly middle-class and urban. They feel the need for community-based women's groups within which they have the space to express their views and to reflect collectively, as a precursor to a public voice.

Conclusion

This initial research has shown that despite the fact that loyalist women may not currently have a public voice, their influence within family and community is still considerable, and their relationship to both past and future is pivotal in the creation of a narrative about the peace process, peacebuilding and democracy more generally. The failure to ensure that this voice becomes public, and thereby possible to engage with, runs the risk of contributing to further distrust and marginalisation. While the views of these loyalist women may not always be comfortable, or indeed welcome, it is important that they are heard so that they will build the confidence to engage on a broader basis. The current context of ethno-nationalist masculinity that has largely framed both the Troubles and the peace process cannot be allowed to continue to minimise women's voices from whatever 'side' of the community in Northern Ireland. But any such new space to negotiate gender and identities must include the voices of loyalist women from outside Belfast to, hopefully, counter the current mutually exclusive narratives of the peace process.

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