



# Policing unruly women: The state and sexual violence during the Northern Irish Troubles



Theresa O'Keefe<sup>1</sup>

Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

Northern Ireland is not typically cited as an example of a conflict reliant on sexual violence. This is due, in part, to how wartime sexual violence is conceptualised, measured and normalised. Adopting a continuum of sexual violence model to view a range of abusive behaviours as interconnected the paper argues that a clear pattern of state-perpetrated sexual violence is discernible during the Troubles. Based on feminist ethnographic research it details how the state through prison authorities, police, soldiers and other security forces weaponised sexual violence as a means of disciplining and punishing republican women deemed deviant for transgressing gender norms. Two key interfaces where republican women regularly interacted with security forces during the war - everyday policing and detention - illustrate both the importance of viewing the a range of sexually abusive practices on a continuum and how such practices were weaponised for the purposes of policing unruly, disruptive, transgressive women.

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## Introduction

The Troubles, a euphemism for the Northern Irish conflict, erupted in 1968 and protracted across three decades in an area roughly the size of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Concentrated primarily in working-class areas of Belfast, Derry, Armagh and Tyrone, this war was particularly oppressive (Coulter, 1999; Fay, Morrissey, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1999; Feldman, 1991; Ruane & Todd, 1996). Even in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland, violence remains a feature of everyday life. Poverty and gender inequality not only persist but are on the incline as increasing rates of joblessness, homelessness, and violence against women feature alongside the increased criminalisation of women who have had abortions (Bell, McVeigh, & Dúchán, 2016; Fitzpatrick, Pawson, Bramley, Wilcox, & Watts, 2014; Knox, 2016; Enright, McCandless, & O'Donoghue, 2016; Inge, 2016; O'Keefe, 2012). Suicide rates are also rising: the number of deaths by suicide since the Agreement was signed in 1998 is set to surpass the number of conflict-related deaths during the Troubles (Torney, 2014). This war's victims and their families continually seek justice despite the inquiries, enquiries, commissions, and committees established in the wake of the ceasefires. In reality, such bodies do more to establish 'The Past' than the 'truth'. 'The Past' dislodges 'The Troubles' as a euphemism for the war, widened to include any and all forms of violence, injustice or crimes experienced during

the conflict. To establish 'The Past' disconnects, neatly ruptures, and separates by some fictitious border of time wherein the hurt and indeed effects of the war are not a feature of present-day, supposedly post-conflict Northern Ireland. Furthermore, despite a number of attempts to demarcate and deal with 'The Past' by the state, academics, community groups and organisations very little attention has been given to gender abuses of the state.

When we think of the Northern Irish conflict we tend not to associate it with sexual violence, especially sexual violence perpetrated by the state. This is partly because the oft-cited examples of conflicts characterised by sexual violence tend to be cases like Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Sierra Leone. Though we know British security forces used the north as a testing ground for practices emulated in other conflicts, including torture and illegal killings (Cadwallader, 2013; Gibney & Gibney, 2014; Punch, 2012), little work has been done to determine whether sexual violence was also part of the arsenal of British state forces in the North. Sexual violence remains relatively hidden with The Kincora boys' home and Máiría Cahill cases revealing but a tip of an undoubtedly enormous iceberg that lurks beneath the surface.<sup>3</sup> Despite these injustices, it is presumed the reliance on sexual violence as a weapon of war perpetrated by the state did not occur in the

E-mail address: [theresa.okeefe@ucc.ie](mailto:theresa.okeefe@ucc.ie).

<sup>1</sup> Present Address: Department of Sociology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> For contextual reading on the history of the Troubles see Aretxaga, 1997; Coulter, 1999; Feldman, 1991; Miller, 2014; Purdie, 1990; Ruane & Todd, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Kincora Boys Home was the site of institutionalised sexual abuse against young boys who attended the Belfast school in the 1970s. The abuse was covered up by the state and is the subject of on-going legal proceedings. Victims say MI5 were complicit in the sexual abuse of children. See: Dodd and Norton-Taylor (2015). Máiría Cahill, former Sinn Féin member turned Irish Labour Party politician accused the republican leadership of covering up her sexual abuse at the hands of a prominent member of the IRA between 1997 and 1998.

north. Is this assumption accurate though? What do we actually know of the manner in which sexual violence was used by the British state, especially the prison authorities, soldiers, the police? Much has been written on the gender dimensions of the Troubles (Aretxaga, 1997; Cockburn, 1998; O'Keefe, 2013; O'Rourke, 2013) yet the use of sexual violence by the state is relatively understudied. Feminist research on the north has pointed to the link between militarisation and patterns of increased domestic and intimate partner violence during the war (McWilliams, 1997; Smyth, 1995; Swaine, 2015) with some feminists coining the Troubles as 'armed patriarchy' (Edgerton, 1986). Yet, little research or formal investigation into state-directed sexual violence in the North has been undertaken to date. Furthermore, grassroots and state-led initiatives dedicated to uncovering and seeking justice for the harms that occurred during the Troubles like Relatives for Justice, the Pat Finucane Centre, the Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVSNI), and the Historical Enquires Team have not prioritised or been mandated to investigate sexual violence.

Lack of attention to state-perpetrated sexual violence in the north partially communicates a misguided assumption that such violence did not occur on any scale during the Troubles. In a cyclical conclusion, this view is derived from the lack of attempts to collection information on such harms, and is connected to the way in which sexual violence is actually delineated and documented.

Feminist scholarship has rendered visible the ways in which sexual violence is repeatedly used as a weapon of war. One of the earliest interventions was Susan Brownmiller's 1975 *Against our Will*. After atrocities in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia where mass rape was used as a form of ethnic cleansing, feminists and policy makers researched sexual violence with particular urgency. Over time this research has documented discernible patterns of sexual violence during conflict, particularly the use of rape as a weapon of war (Cockburn, 2001; Enloe, 1993, 2000; Leatherman, 2011; Wood, 2009). Feminists have done great work reshaping institutional definitions of sexual violence during conflict, pushing for rape to be enforced as a war crime, a crime against humanity and recognised as a form of genocide. Much of the feminist focus is on the use of systematic or strategic rape as is reflected in the International Criminal Court's limited definition of wartime sexual violence. Feminist analyses of sexual violence are often based on analyses of rape as a weapon of war and though studies of sexual violence are prevalent, sexual violence is used interchangeably with rape with the former now synonymous with the latter (See for example, Cockburn, 2001; Enloe, 1993, 2000). Little has been done to distinguish or theorise conflict-related sexual violence beyond rape. This has perpetuated a hierarchy of sexual violence which places rape, particularly systematic mass rape, at the very top. In constructing a hierarchy of harm, a heteronormative, androcentric conceptualisation of sexual violence is reinforced, whereby violence and harm are primarily associated with penetration. Conflation of rape with sexual violence also obscures much of the sexual violence that takes place in conflict zones and many crimes go undocumented as a consequence.

A number of feminist scholars have called for a reconfiguration of how we explain sexual violence during armed conflict. Miranda Alison (2007) argues that feminist theorisations of conflict-related sexual violence are too narrow, particularly as its male victims remain invisible. Laura Shepherd (2007) also calls for a broadening of wartime gender-based and sexual violence to reflect how gender is not fixed or transhistorical but a product of social relations, and a means by which gender is violently reproduced. Aisling Swaine (2015) suggests our understanding of conflict-related violence is obscured by a limited attention to certain forms of gender-based violence and argues that violence which "fulfilled personal instead of political goals" (i.e. intimate partner violence) should also be considered as conflict-related violence (p. 783). Swaine argues narrowing the definition of conflict-related violence prevents any acknowledgement, accountability, or redress for victims (p. 141). This reasoning can also be extended to cases of conflict-related sexual violence beyond the home.

Theorisations of sexual violence should connect the full spectrum of actions that support cultures of sexual violence that emerge during conflict. In much the same way that Cynthia Cockburn (2004) argues that the gender-based violence on the battlefield is connected to the violence in the bedroom, so too must we consider sexual violence not in terms of a hierarchy of harm but a continuum of violence. A continuum of sexual violence is meant not as a scale on which the most harmful is ranked at opposite ends of least harmful abuses, but instead as a set of inter-related, interdependent practices that are held together by gendered webs of power, giving rise to and reinforcing a climate of sexual violence in much the same way that rape culture is discursively imagined. Writing on sexual violence outside the confines of war, Liz Kelly (1987) makes the case for considering sexual violence on a continuum as it allows us to see the range and forms of sexual abuse women endure. Her interviews with women who have experienced sexual violence showed there are "no clearly defined and discrete analytic categories" into which such experiences can be placed (p. 48). Furthermore, the sexual violences experienced by women are subjectively defined and "shade into and out of a given category" making rigid categories like assault, rape or harassment less meaningful (Kelly, 1987: 48). The continuum of gender-based violence model allows for a more nuanced understanding, as O'Rourke (2015) argues, as it emphasises both the commonalities across a range of harms as well as the interconnectedness of these harms across periods of societal transition (p. 120). Extending the continuum concept to sexual violences that occur during wartime reveals not just the interconnectedness of different forms of sexual abuse but also makes clear how, for example, harassment functions systematic rape, that the power of sexual assault for instance is reinforced through threat. The continuum also strengthens the ability to illustrate state-perpetrated sexual violence, which tends to be depoliticised as interpersonal violence when instances of rape are fewer relative to other conflicts. Thus the continuum can reveal the myriad of ways in which the state is implicated and/or active in the perpetration and reinforcement of structural sexual violence.

The case of the Northern Irish conflict provides a concrete example of how the hierarchy and narrowing of sexual violence obscures the lived reality of those who suffer sexual trauma. As there is little evidence of conventionally defined forms of systemic rape, Northern Ireland is not typically cited as an example of a sexually violent conflict. While patterns of sexual violence found in the DRC or Rwanda are not immediately evident in the north, does this imply that sexual violence was not a prominent feature of the Troubles? This paper argues that the conflict in the north of Ireland was indeed a conflict where the weaponisation of sexual violence was practiced by the state. If we consider a range of abusive behaviours as examples of sexual violence it discloses that sexual violence was a feature of the Troubles and, in particular, a currency of the state. Sexually abusive behaviours were widely used by security forces – including soldiers, police and prison guards – as a weapon in the war. What we learn from the Northern Irish case is that sexual violence is not only pervasive and a part of everyday life, it is also used as a means to police subversive women who challenged the authority of the state. Women living in republican communities were deemed unruly, disruptive, particularly as they became politicised, moved beyond the home and out onto the streets to resist state violence (O'Keefe, 2013). Sexual violence was used by the state as a means to punish republican women for transgressing such gender norms and exerting political agency.

This article is based on feminist ethnographic research including qualitative interviews, documentary and archival research to analyse testimonies of women's experiences with state forces. In addition to personal interviews conducted with republican women by the author for a larger project of feminist activism, testimonies are derived from letters and essays written by former republican prisoners published during the Troubles in feminist magazines like *Women's News*, *Spare Rib* and Sinn Féin Women's Department's *Women in Struggle*. The analysis also relies on a series of accounts by women writing on their

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