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Motherhood-Based Advocacy for Transitional Justice in Northern Ireland

By Zoha Siddiqui, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to understand why motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice has not been a well-organized mass movement in Northern Ireland like in other post-conflict states. In other transitional justice contexts, women have formed organizations to stake claims to justice based on their identity as bereaved mothers—organizations like the Madres de La Plaza de Mayo, Mothers of Srebrenica, and Tamil mothers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka are paradigmatic examples. This dissertation draws three main conclusions about motherhood, conflict, and transitional justice in Northern Ireland. The first argument is that maternal harm was a purposeful part of the strategy of terror on both sides of the conflict divide. The second argument is that bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland are sometimes depicted using essentialist tropes which undermine women's transitional justice demands; in newspapers, essentialist tropes neutralize women's political demands, whereas in paramilitary murals, depictions of maternal harm are coopted to advance narratives of ethno-nationalist victimhood and struggle. The third and final argument is that ethno-nationalist identity, rather than gender or motherhood identity, continues to define and divide women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland, as well as women's attitudes toward transitional justice. The dissertation is a novel contribution to feminist transitional justice scholarship because it offers more analytical and empirical purchase on the understudied topic of motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice.

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Introduction

In considering advocacy for justice in post-conflict states, the image of the protesting bereaved mother easily comes to mind. In most images, she holds a monochrome portrait photograph of a young adult—her son or daughter, disappeared or killed during conflict or dictatorship. The woman may be wearing a headscarf, a purposeful reminder of her age and femininity. She is most likely accompanied by other middle-aged women, clutching monochrome portraits of their own children, or perhaps banners demanding truth and justice. These scenes are usually boldly political, in front of a president's office or a state court, but sometimes they are more domestic, taken within the sanctuary of a family home. These iconic images of motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice––policies to redress human rights abuses committed during conflict––can be found across post-conflict states. They have become emblematic of transitional justice in Argentina, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, and other contexts—and relevant but less widespread in Northern Ireland.

While gender and family relations have been important themes in dealing with the legacy of conflict-related harms in Northern Ireland, women staking claims to justice for conflict-related harms using their motherhood identity has not been as prevalent, well-organized, or central in Northern Ireland as in other contexts. Some paradigmatic examples of motherhood-based advocacy organizations in other post-conflict states are the Mothers of Srebrenica in Bosnia, the Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, and the Tamil mothers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka. These organizations are well-

organized mass movements of women who have experienced conflict-related maternal harm and advocate for official investigations and legal justice to redress those crimes.

This dissertation primarily seeks to understand why motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice has not been a well-organized mass movement in Northern Ireland like in other post-conflict states. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to gain more analytical and empirical purchase on the understudied topic of motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice, by combining feminist studies, transitional justice scholarship, and empirical observations of motherhood-based activism in Northern Ireland.

The dissertation advances three main arguments. First, it is argued that maternal harm was a purposeful part of the strategy of terror used by state and non-state forces during the Northern Ireland conflict, and that women on both sides of the conflict divide experienced maternal harm. Second, it is argued that bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland are sometimes depicted using essentialist tropes which undermine their transitional justice demands—illustrative examples from newspapers and paramilitary murals that depict bereaved mothers using essentialist tropes bring this point to life. Third, it is argued that ethno-nationalist identity, rather than gender or motherhood identity, defines and divides women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland, which can explain why women's experiences of maternal harm did not unite them across the conflict divide to form a non-sectarian transitional justice advocacy organization. Additionally, women's attitudes toward transitional justice and their choice of whether or not to engage in transitional justice advocacy are also strongly determined by their ethno-nationalist and religious identity.

This dissertation makes three important contributions to scholarship. First, this dissertation adds empirical detail to feminist transitional justice scholarship on women's experiences of conflict-related harm, victimhood, and advocacy. By further mapping gender-based advocacy for transitional justice in Northern Ireland, this dissertation advances much-needed analytical and empirical understanding on the topic of motherhood-based advocacy for justice. Second, this dissertation builds understanding of how gender and sectarianism impact efforts to deal with the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland; specifically, how ethno-nationalist identity shapes women's attitudes toward transitional justice and their engagement in justice advocacy. This point is especially relevant to a conflict where harm was perpetrated and experienced on the basis of both gender and ethno-nationalist-religious identity. Third and finally, this dissertation grounds feminist theory on gender and conflict in real anecdotes. Analysis of murals, newspaper clippings, and photography reveal the extent to which traditional gender roles and tropes are prevalent during conflict—and the ways that women themselves but also paramilitary organizations and media use those tropes to neutralize or advance certain political interests.

Gender and the Northern Ireland Conflict

The period of violent conflict in Northern Ireland took place over about thirty years, between the late 1960s and 1998 with the signing of a peace agreement. The conflict was fought largely along ethno-nationalist-religious lines, with a range of actors including state

security forces and paramilitary organizations. In broad terms, Catholic nationalists and republicans represented one side of the conflict divide, whereas Protestant unionists and loyalists represented the other side. Catholic nationalists and republicans were largely Irish-identifying and sought to reunify Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as the two had been split by British colonial rule in 1920. On the other side of the conflict divide, Protestant unionists and loyalists sought to remain within the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has remained in the United Kingdom since the 1920 partition.

As mentioned, conflict-related violence was perpetrated by a broad range of actors, including British security forces and paramilitary organizations on both sides of the conflict divide. Most conflict-related deaths and injuries were borne by civilians, rather than by members of state or non-state armed groups (*CAIN: Sutton Index of Deaths*, no date). All paramilitary groups were proscribed during and after the conflict under the United Kingdom's anti-terrorism laws, but in some cases there was collusion between members of paramilitary organizations and the police and military (Boutcher, 2024). Generally, the term 'republicans' refers to Catholic nationalists who took up arms during the conflict, and the term 'loyalists' refers to Protestant unionists who did the same. This dissertation will later reference two paramilitary organizations—the Irish Republican Army, which was the largest and most well-known Catholic republican paramilitary group, and the Ulster Defense Association, which was a Protestant loyalist group.

Men represented the vast majority of those killed in Northern Ireland during the conflict. An estimated ninety percent of victims were male, out of a total 3,532 deaths (*CAIN: Sutton Index of Deaths*, no date). Women therefore widely and acutely experienced bereavement and loss—including mothers. Some women were also

combatants in paramilitary organizations, although they formed the vast minority of combatants during the conflict. Republican women were more commonly combatants in paramilitary organizations than loyalist women; loyalist women on the other hand often held positions within paramilitary groups to organize support for male political prisoners (Marion, 2021).

Transitional Justice in Northern Ireland

Just as motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice was less organized and prevalent in Northern Ireland than in other post-conflict states, so too was transitional justice itself. Transitional justice in Northern Ireland has often been described as 'piecemeal,' reflecting the fact that no truth or justice mechanisms were set up as part of the peace agreement that ended the conflict in 1998.

The piecemeal transitional justice mechanisms set up in Northern Ireland in the decades following the peace agreement consisted of a 'package of measures' agreed to by the United Kingdom following a series of rulings at the European Court of Human Rights. These measures included truth recovery mechanisms like inquests and public inquiries, as well as legal justice mechanisms like prosecutorial powers (*The Road to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Reconciliation and Legacy) Act 2023*, 2023, 6). Nonetheless, these measures were closed by UK parliament in 2023 with the Northern Ireland Troubles (Reconciliation and Legacy) Act. The Act introduced a new temporary legacy body and conditional immunity scheme that have been criticized broadly by human rights groups,

the European Court of Human Rights, the Irish government, and crucially every political party in Northern Ireland.

The Legacy Act follows a historical pattern of impunity by the UK government in respect to the Northern Ireland conflict. Impunity in this context has meant a lack of truth recovery and the impossibility of holding accountable perpetrators of conflict-related harms (*Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict*, 2024). Indeed, in only a handful of cases have UK courts brought perpetrators of state killings during the Northern Ireland conflict to account, despite estimates that state actors were directly responsible for ten percent of conflict-related deaths (*Bitter Legacy: State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict*, 2024, 1). There have only been a few dozen investigations and prosecutions into paramilitary killings as well, even though paramilitary organizations perpetrated the majority of conflict-related harms (O'Neill, 2024).

Motherhood-Based Advocacy for Transitional Justice in Context

An introduction to the landscape of motherhood-based advocacy in Northern Ireland is also due. While motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice in Northern Ireland was not as prevalent or centrally organized as in other post-conflict states, there were certainly organizations that addressed the themes of gender and relational conflict-related harm, as well as individual cases of motherhood-based advocacy.

Several organizations in Northern Ireland recognized maternal harm as a unique and primary conflict-related harm, or otherwise represented gendered advocacy for peace and justice. An organization called Peace People founded during the conflict was led by women calling for an end to the conflict. Relatives for Justice, Wave Trauma Centre, the Pat Finucane Centre, and the Bloody Sunday Trust were organizations formed during the conflict for bereaved family-members of the conflict to seek support and advocate for truth and justice. While these organizations speak to the themes of gender and conflict-related relational harms, they are not positioned as motherhood-based organizations for truth and justice specifically.

In Northern Ireland, several individual women have also advocated for truth and justice for conflict-related harms, although most of these women were Catholic nationalists, as Chapter 5 will discuss. Some examples of these women include mothers of some of the seventeen people who were disappeared during the conflict by paramilitary organizations, particularly that of Margaret McKinney and Mary McClory. Their cases and additional ones are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Margaret McKinney's case bears further introduction, as it is an illustrative example of the power of motherhood-based advocacy in persuading political elites of the importance of post-conflict truth and justice. Margaret's son Brian was disappeared at age twenty-two by the IRA in 1978. On a trip to the White House with Wave Trauma Centre in 1998, Margaret met with President Bill Clinton. She recounts,

> 'I told him my whole story. He came over and took my hand, and he said, "I promise you I'll help you find your son." So six weeks later, and Gerry Adams' come up to the [White] House, and [President Clinton] said, "You're gonna give Brian's body back."' (*Margaret McKinney*, 2013)

Margaret's story highlights the emotional resonance of mothers' stories of victimhood and their claims to justice. In many contexts, as discussed further in Chapter 4, motherhood holds symbolic currency that is leveraged by women to stake and advance their claims to truth and justice, among other political demands. It is worth highlighting at the outset how important women's motherhood-based advocacy has been in advancing truth and justice for post-conflict states globally and for some individual cases in Northern Ireland, to foreground the relevance of this topic.

Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology

A Feminist Theory of Transitional Justice

This research project is informed by a feminist theory of transitional justice that foregrounds gender. Gender is the way that masculinity and femininity are defined within a particular culture. Gender is socially constructed, meaning that it exists within a person or group's social understanding, rather than as an objective fact. As such, gender is mutable and subjective and must be understood within a particular cultural context. Gender is nonetheless real and observable and has profound implications for how women fare under political and legal processes (Ní Aoláin, 2011).

This section develops the argument that gender, although often overlooked, is interwoven into post-conflict politics, justice, advocacy, and law—from the gender makeup of security forces, and the distribution of harm across genders during conflict, to the inclusion and exclusion of gendered crimes in law and policies of redress and reparation. These policies of redress and reparation are collectively known as transitional justice. This dissertation is therefore located at the intersection of transitional justice theory and feminist theory.

Transitional justice theories consider how states should redress and repair the legacy of human rights abuses after a period of mass violence (Buckley-Zistel, 2014). A feminist theory of transitional justice examines the same issues but also considers how gender and patriarchy affect conflict, harm, victimhood, and redress, and seeks to understand whether and how gender is relevant to conflict transformation and political

transition. This paper is a feminist transitional justice project, as it considers how gender and patriarchy shape women's experiences of harm and conflict, and how and why some women choose to mobilize their gendered identities as mothers towards transitional justice advocacy.

Gender is vitally important to consider in transitional justice research because conflict is perpetrated and experienced in highly gendered ways, which then has gender implications for how conflict-related harms should be redressed and repaired. First, on a granular level, harm is often perpetrated directly against individuals because of their gender, with the intent of undermining or violating their gendered identities and bodies (Ní Aoláin, 2000). Gender-based and sexual violence are recognized as crimes under international law and may constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocidal acts. Maternal harm, a central topic to this paper, is another example of how conflict-related violence can be perpetrated with the intent and effect of severing a gendered identity (mother) and relationship (mother and child) (Ní Aoláin, 2000).

A second and more implicit way that gender figures into conflict and transitional justice is through the gendered discourses and stereotypes constructing, representing, and underpinning war, violence, peace, and justice. Men are often depicted during conflict as armed combatants, 'emphasizing the masculinization of the military and of war,' whereas women are often depicted as grieving mother, widow, refugee, and victim (Ní Aoláin, 2011, 40). Women and men are both essentialized during conflict, meaning they are portrayed as intrinsically embodying certain stereotypical traits, and women are often essentialized as inherently peaceful and non-violent in wartime discourse.

Feminist theorists recognize an enduring and 'essential link' among the themes of women, motherhood, and non-violence in discourse around conflict and war (Jacobs, Jacobsen and Marchbank, 2000, 13). This paper explores how some women sometimes practice *strategic essentialism*—mobilizing and leveraging gender stereotypes to generate public sympathy, support, and momentum for their advocacy. In other cases, as this paper also explores, women engage in transitional justice advocacy for other reasons, or not at all. In exploring strategic essentialism, the paper does not seek to essentialize women nor reduce womanhood to motherhood and nonviolence, but instead show that women sometimes exercise their agency in transitional justice conflicts through purposively gendered ways.

Gender must also be understood in relation to other identity markers, such as class, race, and religion—a concept called intersectionality. Indeed, a key aspect of feminist research is exploring the intersection of marginalized identities and how women fare under those intersections. Particularly in conflict and security studies, the intersection of marginalized identities may reveal different ways that women experience insecurity and harm. This dissertation foregrounds intersectionality by seeking to understand how women's class, religion, and ethno-nationalist identities in Northern Ireland affect their experiences of harm, grief, victimhood, and redress. This dissertation ultimately seeks to understand how women's intersectional identities may affect their decision to engage in transitional justice advocacy.

Similarly, this paper takes a relational autonomy approach. Relational autonomy seeks to square individual autonomy and freedom with social or relational constraints (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). For instance, women in post-conflict states may express their

agency through transitional justice advocacy, yet their advocacy may face concrete constraints like paramilitary intimidation as structured by their ethno-nationalist identity. Women certainly maintain agency during and after conflict, although that agency is sometimes constrained or influenced by patriarchy and other oppressive social and political structures (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 193). A relational autonomy approach therefore calls for an analysis of popular representations of women, in order to analyze women's agency within the broader social and political context (Åhäll, 2012).

Methodology and Research Process

Since a feminist theory of transitional justice comprehends gender as both an implicit and explicit aspect of conflict, harm, victimhood, and redress, this paper relies on qualitative research methods to discern and unpack how gender and motherhood both explicitly and implicitly motivate and shape transitional justice advocacy. Qualitative research is important to feminist studies because it provides nuance and subjectivity in respect to topics like gender, marginalization, and intersectionality (McHugh, 2020). This dissertation follows in the post-positivist tradition of generating knowledge from subjective and socially-constructed perspectives.

A variety of primary sources inform this paper on maternal harm, motherhood-based advocacy, and depictions of political motherhood during the Northern Ireland conflict. These primary sources include an oral history collection; public archives of newspaper articles and materials of human rights organizations; and political murals in

Belfast and Derry, Northern Ireland. The oral histories reveal how maternal harm was experienced in the Northern Ireland conflict across ethno-nationalist and religious communities. The archives and murals reveal how motherhood is politicized and represented in public discourse in Northern Ireland in respect to the conflict.

The oral histories are testimonies of bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland, whose sons and daughters were killed in the conflict. Oral histories are an important source in feminist research because they provide access to marginalized voices that may otherwise be overlooked in academic research (Leavy, 2011). These oral histories center Northern Ireland women's own testimony about maternal harm and their experiences of grief and advocacy during the conflict.

The oral histories were recorded by Wave Trauma Centre, a leading support group in Northern Ireland for victims and survivors of conflict-related harms. The collection of oral histories is called 'Loss of a Child' and forms part of Wave's broader storytelling project, Stories from Silence (*Loss of a Child Archives*, 2013). In the 'Loss of a Child' collection, nineteen oral histories are collected from bereaved mothers. All nineteen of these oral histories were analyzed for this dissertation. The average length of each oral history is four minutes and sixteen seconds. Altogether, the oral histories comprise 2.6 hours of testimony by bereaved mothers on their experiences of maternal harm, grief, and any relevant advocacy.

The second primary source leveraged in this dissertation are public archives of newspaper articles and materials produced by human rights organizations in Northern Ireland. Feminist researchers use archives to recover women's voices buried in male-

dominated collections (Martin, 2018, 455). Moreover, archives can reveal highly gendered discourses and representations of women, or lack thereof, in newspaper and other media. This dissertation uses archives to similar show how political motherhood was represented in media in Northern Ireland during the conflict.

The archives accessed for this dissertation were mainly compiled and maintained by Linen Hall Library in Belfast. For this dissertation, one box of archives was analyzed, which was chosen because it compiled materials on relational harm during the Northern Ireland conflict. The box included newspaper clippings and materials of human rights organizations including Families Against Intimidation and Terror, Wave Trauma Centre, and Relatives for Justice. In addition to this archival box, two other newspaper clippings were analyzed: one posted outside a family home near the Bogside—a republican neighborhood in Derry—and one posted at the Loyalist Conflict Museum in East Belfast. These clippings were analyzed because of the content and context: the content was coverage of funerals during the conflict that heavily featured images and descriptions of bereaved mothers, and the context was that these clippings were purposefully saved and posted to make public political statements.

Finally, this dissertation engaged a limited amount of visual analysis of political murals, sites of public memory, and other art in Northern Ireland that speak to the themes of political motherhood, victimhood, and truth and justice. Three murals were analyzed and form the crux of the visual analysis undertaken in this dissertation. These murals were chosen because of their depiction of political motherhood during conflict, and all found by the author while walking through neighborhoods of Belfast and Derry. Visual analysis of public art and sites of memory are important because they bear witness to

past and present politics dynamics and opinions, shaping as well as depicting political

demands (Bleiker, 2018, 2-3).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Motherhood-based transitional justice advocacy is a story with several interlocking components. The first component is the role of civil society advocacy in transitional justice—i.e., why civil society organizations like groups of bereaved mothers are relevant actors to transitional justice. The second component is how violence and harm are gendered, and specifically how maternal harm is a discrete and unique harm experienced by mothers during conflict. The third component is the role of strategic essentialism in advocacy, which can help explain why mothers in post-conflict states may choose to engage in explicitly and implicitly gendered advocacy.

Civil Society and Victim Group Advocacy in Transitional Justice

Civil society organizations are powerful and effective in demanding transitional justice, at both the domestic and international level. Keck and Sikkink (1998) made the earliest and most important contribution toward understanding this empirical and causal story. Their model centers transnational advocacy networks, or networks of domestic and international civil society organizations advocating for specific norms and policies—for example, to advance transitional justice. Keck and Sikkink showed that these transnational advocacy networks are successful in leveraging moral arguments over states to advance human rights laws and norms. In Keck and Sikkink's model, domestic civil society organizations apply bottom-up pressure on states but are unfortunately often

suppressed or rejected; when so, they turn to their international allies to name and shame those same states into better behavior.

Scholars of transitional justice have adopted Keck and Sikkink's theory to explain how civil society effectively advocates for transitional justice in many contexts. Zvobgo (2020) applies Keck and Sikkink's model to find that a global transitional justice network leverages moral arguments and information over states to get them to adopt truth and reconciliation commissions. Gready and Robins (2017) find that transnational social movements can be effective in advocating for and providing locally-informed and democratic 'justice in transition,' which goes further than a narrowly defined set of transitional justice policies to include alternative mechanisms for justice, truth, and healing (965).

Indeed, organizations of bereaved mothers are some of the foremost in transitional justice advocacy, in terms of number, salience, and effectiveness. Examples of these organizations include the Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the Movement of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves, who demanded justice for the enforced disappearance of their sons and daughters in Argentina and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively. Understanding the critical role that civil society organizations play in demanding transitional justice can contextualize and clarify the political salience of maternal advocacy in transitional justice.

Nonetheless, Gready and Robins (2017) point out that while social movements can be effective in advancing transitional justice, victims' groups have been historically limited in their 'impact on transitional justice practice' (964). Victims' groups struggle to

engage in sustained and effective transitional justice advocacy, which may reflect 'the limitations of victimhood as a principal identity around which to mobilize' and the limitations on victims' groups of 'resource mobilisation and political opportunity' (964). Thus, while civil society engagement is central overall to transitional justice advocacy, victims' groups such as organizations of bereaved mothers may struggle to access the resources and political capital necessary to effectively advocate for specific policies or even a broader justice in transition. This paper will explore how bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland may have experienced these limitations to transitional justice advocacy.

Maternal Harm and Gendered Violence in Conflict

Scholars and lawyers have identified several types of gendered violence, only some of which are codified under international law. Sexual and gender-based violence are both recognized as crimes under international law because of successful campaigns by feminist activists. Maternal harm is an example of an unrecognized and uncodified gender-based harm, but one nonetheless with a gendered intent and effect. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin argues that neglecting maternal harm will result in a failure to produce meaningful accountability and to address the totality of harm for victims of sexual violations (2000, 325).

Ní Aoláin (2000) makes the most significant contribution to conceptualizing maternal harm as a discrete, sensitive, and uniquely gendered harm committed during conflict. Ní Aoláin identifies maternal harm as a discrete harm but one in the broader

category of sexual harm (322). Ní Aoláin considers maternal harm a form of sexual violence because separating mother and child is 'aimed at undermining [women's] sexual identity by taking away the ultimate expression of the reproductive self—the child' (323). As such, women's experiences of losing a child are uniquely gendered and sexualized and therefore form a distinct maternal harm.

Some feminist scholars are reluctant to conceptualize women's experiences of harm and agency within the framework of motherhood. Ní Aoláin notes that some feminists are wary of analyzing women's experiences of harm and activism within their reproductive roles, for fear of further stereotyping or essentializing women as mothers. However, Ní Aoláin responds to this concern by emphasizing how motherhood is indeed a relevant identity for many women, and how maternal harm remains a distinct and relevant part of many women's experiences of conflict.

Friedman and Ketola (2023) make another significant contribution towards conceptualizing maternal harm. Friedman and Ketola conceive of maternal harm as two distinct but interrelated violations: the harm of separation and harm to the ability to parent. The harm of separation draws on Ní Aoláin's work, whereas harm to the ability to parent is a novel contribution by Friedman and Ketola. Harm to the ability to parent is seen not only in relation to a child lost to violence, but also in relation to a bereaved parent's surviving children. Friedman and Ketola find that bereaved parents often must make sacrifices in care to their surviving children—including sacrificing time spent with their children at home to protest and advocate for justice (410).

Indeed, Friedman and Ketola recognize the importance of bereaved mothers to transitional justice advocacy (400). They cite the symbolic power of motherhood in post-conflict states and the social and political recognition that maternal harm tends to generate. This recognition includes media and political attention to mothers who share their stories of bereavement. Friedman and Ketola's observations of the symbolic potency of motherhood lead into another important aspect of motherhood-based advocacy, which is strategic essentialism.

Strategic Essentialism in Motherhood-Based Advocacy

Mothers and other women are often essentialized, or stereotyped, as inherently peaceful and nonviolent actors during conflict. Maternal instinct is stereotyped as a naturally nonviolent force governing women's political attitudes and decisions (Hall, 2023). Indeed, Hall (2023) notes that women's political choices are often assumed to be inseparable from their parenting or reproductive choices; and that women and children are often grouped together in discussions of victimhood and violence because they are held together by a persisting maternal body.

While stereotypes of mothers as peaceful or nonviolent do not reflect universal truths, they may ring true for some mothers or even be leveraged by women towards transitional justice advocacy. Stereotypes of women as nonviolent can be problematic because they assume universal truths among women that do not necessarily exist, especially when contrasted against empirical examples of women and mothers taking up

arms, as documented by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007). But for some women, these stereotypes may actually serve as entry points from which to enter transitional justice advocacy, through strategic essentialism.

Some women engage in strategic essentialism, whereby they mobilize stereotypes of themselves as nonviolent as a basis from which to engage in transitional justice advocacy while avoiding backlash or criticism (Mhajne and Whetstone, 2020). Under the patriarchal logic of women as inherently nonviolent, women advocating for peace, justice, and redress for abuses may be perceived as a natural fit within their prescribed role as pacifists and as mothers concerned with their children's security. Strategic essentialism engages with the conceptual framework of relational autonomy. Women that leverage strategic essentialism are agential, yet they must use their agency to navigate a set of concrete constraints.

Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) labels women's use of strategic essentialism 'bargaining with patriarchy.' Kandiyoti sees strategic essentialism as a novel strategy adopted by women to pursue political objectives while operating under patriarchal constraints (274). Sometimes these political objectives are maximizing their own security or preserving the family (274). The objectives might also include justice for maternal harms.

To be sure, by engaging in transitional justice advocacy as mothers, women do not automatically escape criticism, backlash, or policing of their political activity—but the symbolic power of motherhood may provide them an entry point or even an audience for their activism. Moreover, Hall (2023) notes that mothers exercising their agency during conflict do not always do so towards a 'politics of peace' (13). Yet strategic essentialism

remains an important theme in motherhood-based advocacy, as explored in this dissertation.

Gendered Transitional Justice Advocacy in Northern Ireland

This dissertation builds on prior feminist scholarship on gendered transitional justice advocacy in Northern Ireland. The literature reveals several discrete cases of gender-based advocacy for justice by bereaved mothers, sisters, and wives. Moreover, by contextualizing Northern Ireland among other post-conflict states, notable gaps in motherhood-based advocacy are revealed in respect to the Northern Ireland conflict— namely the lack of motherhood-based organizations for truth and justice.

Fidelma Ashe (2006) makes an important intervention in analyzing gender-based transitional justice advocacy by bereaved women in Northern Ireland. Ashe focuses on the McCartney women's search for justice after Robert McCartney's murder in January 2005. Robert's two sisters and partner led a highly gendered campaign calling for the prosecution and conviction of those involved in Robert's murder. Ashe discusses the feminization of the McCartney women's campaign in the media and by the women themselves, including in linking the women's motherhood to 'moral authority and a natural right to protect the family' (164). Indeed, Ashe identifies strategic essentialism as a facet of protests by women during the Northern Ireland conflict more generally.

Robin Whitaker (2008) examines the campaign to free Róisín McAliskey, who was at the time several months' pregnant, from prison. The campaign was led by various

women's rights activists, including Róisín's mother and former Member of Parliament Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. Whitaker problematizes the role of strategic essentialism in the campaign and discusses some activists' criticism of the tactic. Whitaker also notes that sectarianism presents an obstacle to gender-based campaigns for justice in Northern Ireland, a point which this dissertation later unpacks.

Other interventions on this topic include studies of motherhood-based advocacy for republicans on hunger strike in prison in 1981, as well as combatant mother's experiences in paramilitary organizations (McEvoy, 2020; Alderdice, 2023). This dissertation seeks to connect these numerous individual cases to explain the broader landscape of gender-based and motherhood-based advocacy for truth and justice in Northern Ireland, to identify and explain the gaps in this type of organizing in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

Chapter 3: Maternal Harm as a Strategy of Terror in Northern Ireland

'Every mother grieves—let them be from the Shankill, let them be a soldier's mother, every mother cries the same tears. I don't care who they are, I don't care what their religion is, don't care what their stance or style is—they all cry the same as me.' – Jean McBride, 2013

Maternal harm is an observable and widespread experience of women during conflict. It is a distinct experience of gendered harm and is often inflicted with some element of intentionality, rather than as an unfortunate or unintentional byproduct of violence. This chapter argues that in Northern Ireland, maternal harm was a purposeful part of the strategy of terror used by state and non-state forces. The chapter relies on oral histories to demonstrate the profound experience of maternal harm among bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland and highlights cases where perpetrators understood the nature of the harm that they committed.

Recognizing the full extent of maternal harm in Northern Ireland motivates the question: If maternal harm was widespread and central to women's experiences of conflict-related harm in Northern Ireland, then why is motherhood-based advocacy for justice not widespread? Moreover, understanding maternal harm as a strategy of terror underscores the importance of taking a gendered approach to transitional justice, so that transitional justice policies can account for and redress the full portfolio of harm experienced by women during conflict. It is additionally key to understanding why motherhood-based advocacy for justice has become a central fixture of the global transitional justice landscape.

What is Maternal Harm?

The literature understands maternal harm as a type of sexual violation experienced by women during conflict (Ní Aoláin, 2000). Maternal harm is a sexual violation because it seeks to destroy the ultimate expression of reproduction: a woman's child (Ní Aoláin, 2000, 17). Understanding maternal harm as a sexual violation is useful for categorizing the harm under existing structures of international law. Sexual violations like rape were once considered an unfortunate but unintentional consequence of the 'fog of war' but are now codified as distinct, gendered crimes. Categorizing maternal harm as a sexual violation means recognizing it as a real, gendered experienced of violence that begs inquiry and redress despite thus far being overlooked in the popular imagination of conflict-related harms.

'Maternal harm' is a broad phrase that requires further specification of the ways it is experienced by bereaved women. The literature finds that maternal harm manifests in two specific ways: first as the harm of separation between mother and child, and second as harm to the ability to parent (Friedman and Ketola, 2023). The harm of separation is the act of separating a mother from her child, in this case permanently by death to the child. Harm to the ability to parent occurs when the loss of one child negatively impacts a mother's ability to physically and emotionally care for her surviving children; grief, fatigue, and sickness due to the trauma of losing a child are examples of how this harm may manifest.

Maternal harm is a relational harm, so it also engages the right to truth. Relational harms are experienced by family members of victims, as they did not suffer the act of

violence but suffer the emotional and material consequences of losing a loved one. Relational harms are often redressed through truth-seeking, so that family members can gain information into the killing, disappearance, and torture of their loved ones. Truth-seeking and access to such information is often key to family members' process of healing from loss; indeed, families of victims across post-conflict contexts, like Argentina, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere often focus their advocacy on truth-seeking. As such, the right to truth has become a central component of the global transitional justice agenda and is even codified across legal statutes. In respect to Northern Ireland, the right to an investigation into state killings and torture are protected under Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention for Human Rights.

This chapter focuses on how the harm of separation, harm to the ability to parent, and the right to truth manifest in the lives of women bereaved of their children during the Northern Ireland conflict. The chapter closely examines nineteen oral histories, recorded by women in various political, combatant, and civilian roles on all sides of the Northern Ireland conflict, all of whom lost a child to the conflict. The oral histories reveal that bereaved women in both Catholic and Protestant communities experience maternal harm in the same ways. Yet as later chapters will show, sectarianism persists as an obstacle to solidarity between Catholic and Protestant mothers in Northern Ireland, and victimhood claims in Northern Ireland continue to be housed in ethno-national categories rather than gender-based ones.

This chapter will show that maternal harm was a distinct violation experienced by women during the Northern Ireland conflict, rather than an unfortunate byproduct of killings, disappearances, and torture. Maternal harm in Northern Ireland was part of a

deliberate strategy of terror by state and non-state armed groups during the conflict. While not every case of maternal harm was committed intentionally, the oral histories do reveal an element of intentionality and understanding on the part of perpetrators in some cases. The chapter also analyzes literature that shows how motherhood is exploited in other conflict-settings to inflict harm onto women, contributing to the understanding of maternal harm as a strategy of terror in Northern Ireland.

Maternal Harm as a Strategy of Terror in Conflict

Motherhood and family relations are targeted by state and nonstate actors in terror campaigns across conflicts, including in Northern Ireland. Family members and children of 'subversive' or paramilitary groups are often prominent security targets under dictatorship and conflict. 'Kin killings' are used by both states and armed groups to coerce their opponents to surrender or defect (Souleimanov, Siroky and Krause, 2022). Parents are targets of propaganda to prevent their children from joining opposition and terrorist groups (Manzano, 2015). Children are also intentionally separated from their parents in conflict and dictatorship—and under ostensibly democratic regimes, such as in the case of separating indigenous children from their families in Canada and the United States (Sierra, 2023).

Motherhood is a particularly exploited relationship during conflict. There is a volume of evidence showing that violence to women's reproductive parts and to their children have been weaponized as a form of torture in several contexts (Kapur and

Alshaibi, 2023). Women are particularly targeted by reproductive violence and parental harm because of the social role assigned to them as mothers and caretakers and their assumed 'maternal instincts' (Kapur and Alshaibi, 2023). Maternal harm is therefore in many instances an intentional violation committed by perpetrators to inflict gender-specific harms unto women, as part of broader campaigns of terror (Ní Aoláin, 2000).

Enforced disappearances are a particularly poignant example of how armed groups and security forces strategically and purposefully inflict maternal harm onto women as part of their terror campaigns. In an enforced disappearance, a person is abducted and usually tortured or killed but without any reason or information given to their families and loved ones; they are untraceable, having been ripped from their lives suddenly and without pretext or context. Enforced disappearances are intended to cause terror because the tactic leaves behind dozens of questions about what happened to the victim, where they are, and who the perpetrators were (Zarrugh, 2023).

Enforced disappearances target male family members, leaving behind bereaved women to grieve their loved ones without a body and seek information in the hopes of it leading to their return (Zarrugh, 2023, 97). Enforced disappearances are recognized as a particularly gendered crime because men are targeted, and women left behind (Zarrugh, 2023). These bereaved women ultimately form organizations to seek truth and justice for the maternal harms they suffered—such as the Madres de La Plaza de Mayo, Mothers of Srebrenica, and Tamil mothers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka.

While enforced disappearances were not as widespread during the Northern Ireland conflict, a similar gendered dynamic can be observed, where men were targeted,

and women constituted the majority of the bereaved. An estimated ninety percent of people killed during the Northern Ireland conflict were men (*CAIN: Sutton Index of Deaths*, no date). Maternal harm was a widespread experience in Northern Ireland, as the oral histories reveal. It is therefore curious why claims to victimhood and advocacy for justice in Northern Ireland are not widely made on the basis of motherhood identity like in other post-conflict states.

The Harm of Separation in Northern Ireland

The oral histories reveal that maternal harm was a widespread experience of women during the Northern Ireland conflict, and that maternal harm was in some cases perpetrated purposefully as part of a strategy of terror. Based on the literature, maternal harm is understood as the harm of separation and harm to the ability to parent, and maternal harm as a relational harm also engages the right to truth. The harm of separation is the first of two elements of maternal harm; the oral histories show that women across sectarian divides in Northern Ireland experienced the harm of separation and in some cases were taunted by their perpetrators, who understood the gravity of the harm that they had committed.

The oral histories demonstrate how separating mother from child is a uniquely painful experience. Anne Service, whose son Brian was killed at age thirty-five by a loyalist paramilitary, describes the suddenness of being separated from her son: 'I saw him alive, then I saw him coming in, in a box' (*Anne Service*, 2013). Evelyn Quail, whose

son Mark was also killed by loyalist paramilitaries at twenty-six years old, describes: 'The feeling inside your stomach never goes away. Part of me died when he died, definitely' (*Evelyn Quail*, 2013). Women's role as primary caretaker for their children makes the absence of a deceased child from their lives particularly profound.

The oral histories also reveal how the harm of separation is not merely a byproduct of violence but is committed purposefully by perpetrators to inflict terror (Ní Aoláin, 2000, 323). For example, in her oral history, Margaret Delaney said she believed that the soldier who killed her thirteen-year old son understood full and well the impact of the harm of separation because he himself had lost a son two weeks prior. She goes on to state: 'No apologies, no nothing… I want the soldiers that done it, because how would he like me to do that to his son' (*Margaret Delaney*, 2013). Here, Delaney articulates what Ní Aoláin (2000) describes as a profound and mutual understanding of the nature of the harm of separation between the perpetrator and victim (323). Indeed, Delaney suggests that the soldier may have been motivated to commit the harm because of his own experience of losing a child and wanting to inflict that pain onto a nationalist community.

While it is impossible to assign intention to the actions of the soldier who killed Delaney's son, other women also articulated their belief that soldiers committed the harm of separation purposefully, or at least weaponized maternal harm after the fact to inflict terror onto nationalist families. For example, Kathleen Duffy, whose fifteen-year old son Seamus was killed in 1989 by a police officer who fired a plastic bullet, recounted that after Seamus' funeral, her ten-year old daughter was playing at the house when police officers asked her 'if Seamus was coming out to play' (*Kathleen Duffy*, 2013). Kathleen added that police vehicles would park in front of their house at night and shine their

headlights into the Duffy family's living room. To Kathleen, this taunting revealed the perpetrators' understanding of the profound harm they had committed. The harm of separation is understood here not as an accidental byproduct of violence, but as a distinct violation with an element of understanding between the perpetrator and victim.

Harm to the Ability to Parent in Northern Ireland

The second aspect of maternal harm is harm to the ability to parent, especially in relation to a mother's surviving children. Several women speak in detail about how the loss of one child impacted their ability to parent their other children. For example, Marian Radford, whose sixteen-year old son Alan was killed in a Real IRA bombing in 1998, stated plainly: 'It's left its mark on our family because we're not close the way we used to be… We argue a lot, we fall out a lot' (*Marian Radford*, 2013). Linda Molloy also described how her son's death had a 'profound effect on the whole family,' especially on his siblings (*Linda Molloy*, 2013).

Harm to the ability to parent sometimes manifested in women as a heightened fear of losing their other children to violence. For example, Philomena Morgan, whose sixteen-year old son James was killed in 1997, opened up about her persisting fear after James' death that her other children would be hurt or killed. She said, 'I couldn't sleep. The rest of the boys were all late teens. It was just a nightmare when they were going out: Would they be picked up? Would they meet the wrong person? Would they go down a road you

didn't want them to go down?' (*Philomena Morgan*, 2013) Here, Philomena describes harm to the ability to parent as a paralyzing sense of fear for her children's safety.

Yet other mothers describe the added grief they felt over their surviving children having lost a sibling, or their grandchildren having lost a parent. For those mothers, dealing with that secondhand grief became an added burden in their parenting responsibilities. In one example, Virtue Dixon, whose twenty four-year old daughter was killed in a bombing in 1982, described the obstacles she faced in being a caretaker to her bereaved grandson. She described how she 'couldn't go up the stairs to tell him' that his mother had died, and how for weeks following her daughter's death, 'I had no feelings. I couldn't love and I couldn't hate… It wrecks you' (*Virtue Dixon*, 2013). Virtue here describes how secondhand grief can manifest as harm to the ability to parent.

These oral histories reveal how harm to the ability to parent was an experience that transcended women's ethno-nationalist identity and class. Indeed, one of the women who spoke about her experience of maternal harm was Countess Mountbatten of Burma, the daughter of Lord Mountbatten, a British colonial administrator and relative of the royal family. Countess Mountbatten lost her fourteen-year old son Nicholas, her father, and other family members when the IRA bombed her father's boat in 1979.

Strikingly, Countess Mountbatten's testimony echoes those of Catholic nationalist and working-class mothers in Northern Ireland whose children were also killed during the conflict. Countess Mountbatten's son Nicholas had an identical twin, Timothy, who survived the bombing. She shared that 'the devastation of what it was doing to Timothy' was 'an added sense of grief to me' because of how close her twin boys had been

(*Countess Mountbatten*, 2013). Her sentiment, that she took on her surviving children's grief in addition to her own, echoes the experiences of other bereaved mothers during the Northern Ireland conflict, such as Virtue Dixon and Linda Molloy.

Nonetheless, class is certainly still an important factor in women's experiences of conflict, grief, and advocacy. Across conflicts, mothers of different races, political groups, and socio-economic classes have been subject to different state policies, policing practices, and representations in popular media (Weissman and Hall, 2020). Moreover, maternal harm is a weapon of terror sometimes inflicted on specific groups of women but not others in some conflicts (Friedman and Ketola, 2023). Yet in Northern Ireland, these oral histories highlight more similarities than differences among women's experience of maternal harm.

In addition to caretaking for their families materially and economically, many women had to emotionally caretake for their grieving families. Phil Catney describes how 'everybody was hurting' after her twenty seven-year old son Ian was killed, and how it 'helped to sort of be brave for the rest of them' despite her own feelings of grief, shock, and loss (*Phil Catney*, 2013). Marian Radford states in relation to her surviving family, 'I wish I could take away their pain as well' (*Marian Radford*, 2013).

The Right to Truth

The right to truth is another aspect of maternal harm in Northern Ireland and is a strong theme that emerges from the oral histories, both implicitly and explicitly. The oral histories

often began with each woman describing the circumstances of her child's death in detail, implicitly demonstrating that they do not shy away from the truth but instead embrace it. Moreover, some women discussed the right to truth explicitly in the context of inquests and prosecutions by police and judicial authorities.

Indeed, Anne Martin, whose eighteen-year old son was killed in 1984, says explicitly: 'We're still looking for the truth, and we hope we will get the truth' (*Anne Martin*, 2013). This refrain is one often echoed by mothers seeking justice across conflicts; in Argentina, for instance, advocacy and an inter-state court case taken by mothers of the disappeared led to the codification of the right to truth at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and in Argentine law ('Informe N° 21/00', 2000). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, and Sri Lanka among other states, mothers of the disappeared and killed also advocated for the right to truth.

In addition to being a legal and human rights obligation on the state, the truth may be important to bereaved families for several reasons. For Kathleen Duffy, an inquest into her son's killing proved that he was innocent when shot at point blank range by a plastic bullet, an important point for many bereaved families who attribute their children's killings to unjustified state violence (*Kathleen Duffy*, 2013). For others, the truth may facilitate reconciliation with the perpetrators of the crime against their children or in their personal healing journeys (Gonzalez and Varney, 2013).

Chapter Conclusion

The experiences of maternal harm recounted in the oral histories were similar between Protestant and Catholic women. Indeed, some of the women themselves drew equivalences across communities to describe maternal harm. Jean McBride, whose 18-year old son Peter was killed in 1992, says: 'Every mother grieves—let them be from the Shankill, let them be a soldier's mother, every mother cries the same tears. I don't care who they are, I don't care what their religion is, don't care what their stance or style is—they all cry the same as me' (*Jean McBride*, 2013).

As maternal harm was a common experience among women of different classes, religion, and ethno-nationalist identity during the Northern Ireland conflict, the expectation that follows is that women united on the basis of this common experience to advocate for redress. Yet sectarianism and ethno-nationalist identity continue to define and divide women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland.

The sectarian and ethno-nationalist divide in Northern Ireland represents a key obstacle to a mass movement of gender-based and motherhood-based advocacy. The next chapter will explore how despite the pervasiveness of maternal harm in both Protestant and Catholic communities, victimhood claims in Northern Ireland become housed in ethno-national rather than gender-based categories. The primacy of ethno-national identity in expressing victimhood in Northern Ireland helps explain why motherhood-based advocacy is not as relevant or visible in Northern Ireland as in other post-conflict states.

Chapter 4: Agency and Motherhood in Global Context and in the Northern Ireland Conflict

*'Many wept openly – men, women and children were visibly upset…
His mother [Maria] was unable to accompany the funeral and stood
on the stairs of the flat crying supported by friends and relatives who
tried to comfort her.'   – Mullan, 2022*

Essentialist tropes of women as inherently maternal, nonviolent, and moral are prevalent during conflict. By emphasizing their motherhood identity, women sometimes leverage these stereotypes to frame and articulate their experiences of harm and their demands for truth and justice. Motherhood holds symbolic currency across societies, which women may capitalize on to generate sympathy and support for their transitional justice advocacy.

This chapter argues that while some women in Northern Ireland have used strategic essentialism to advance their claims to justice, in other instances essentialist tropes are projected onto them with the effect of neutralizing any political demands. This chapter explores two main ways that women are essentialized in Northern Ireland with this effect. In the first case, media portray women's experience of maternal harm as a natural maternal reaction to loss and a collateral of conflict, rather than a mobilizing force for justice and conflict transformation. In the second case, paramilitary organizations co-opt political motherhood to mobilize support for ethno-nationalist struggle, rather than for transitional justice to redress maternal harms.

Altogether, this chapter contributes to the overall argument that in Northern Ireland, claims to victimhood and justice continue to be housed in ethno-nationalist rather than gender categories in Northern Ireland. This argument offers a broader explanation for why

motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice is not as prevalent or well-organized in Northern Ireland as in other post-conflict states.

Strategic Essentialism and Motherhood-Based Advocacy in Global Context

Women in conflicted and post-conflict societies engage in strategic essentialism to organize and make political demands while navigating policing, surveillance, and the constraints of patriarchy (Alderdice, 2023, 5). Women are consistently faced with essentialist stereotypes of them as non-violent, maternal, and moral, but sometimes these assumptions provide women with opportunities to organize in public and private spaces that otherwise would not be afforded. Women across conflict settings have used motherhood identity to position themselves as 'neutral or "above" partisan politics, which has been used advantageously in many difficult political environments' (Mhajne and Whetstone, 2020, 160).

Of course, women engaged in transitional justice advocacy in post-conflict states are not immune from policing or repression. In December 1977, three of the Madres de La Plaza de Mayo including a founding member were disappeared under the instruction of the Argentine military junta. Mothers advocating for peace and justice in Bosnia, Iran, and other contexts have also faced violent repression (Alderdice, 2023, 13). But strategic essentialism has allowed women to carve out a role for themselves in transitional politics in several contexts. Although several of the Madres were surveilled, repressed, and even

disappeared, the organization was the leading activist force in confronting Argentina's military junta during their regime of terror (Mhajne and Whetstone, 2020).

Assumptions about women's nonviolence and morality are not the only factors that may influence how they are perceived during conflict or motivate the strategic use of essentialism. Motherhood identity in the context of nationalism and conflict is especially potent because of the language of defending the 'motherland' and 'women and children' through warfare; motherhood has historically been an important concept in framing nationhood and political struggle (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 36). By instrumentalizing the language of motherhood, which has proved effective in generating nationalist solidarity during conflict, women can mobilize support and solidarity around the cause of justice.

Women in conflicted and post-conflict states engage in strategic essentialism through their discourse. By including 'mothers' in the names of their organizations, women choose to associate with their maternalism, center their relationships with their children in their advocacy, and motivate their advocacy with their experience of bereavement and maternal harm. The names with 'mother' in them appear not just in media coverage, but also on the banners they carry during rallies. Some examples of these organizations include Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo; Co-Madres in El Salvador; and the Mothers of Srebrenica.

Motherhood-based advocacy organizations also engage in strategic essentialism through their aesthetic choices. Banners at rallies present just one example. The most emblematic banners used by mothers advocating for justice are grid collages of hundreds of portrait photographs of disappeared sons and daughters. Portrait photographs of

women's disappeared children feature heavily in their campaigns for justice, to render visible the disappeared and to ground their advocacy in their experience of maternal harm and their relationship to their children.

The Mothers of Srebrenica have also used clothes lines with sheets as banners, representing the essential link between care work in the home and the 'caring' work of advocating for justice for their disappeared children (Kurtic, 2022; Whetstone, 2023, 45). By bringing elements of the domestic sphere into their public political advocacy, mothers are able to cast their highly political demands under a sympathetic light by bringing to the fore maternal traits that are recognizable and non-threatening under patriarchy.

The image of the weeping mother also features on protest banners used by mothers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka (*Tamil Guardian*, 2020). Mothers engaged in justice advocacy must strike a careful and strategic balance of politics and emotion. Emotions underly much of bereaved women's advocacy, and they can draw attention and support from the public and political elites. But emotions can also be used to overshadow the political content of women's advocacy by reducing their experience of maternal harm to a 'natural' maternal reaction rather than a collective political response to a strategy of terror.

Another emblematic aesthetic choice of mothers engaged in transitional justice advocacy is the use of the headscarf, a decidedly and unmistakably feminine article of clothing, often donned by older, religious women. Headscarves have become a shorthand for Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and can be seen throughout the country—worn by protestors, spraypainted onto walls and sidewalks, tattooed on arms,

constructed as art pieces in public plazas. In El Salvador, too, headscarves feature in the Co-Madres' campaign, and among the Mothers of Srebrenica in Bosnia, many of whom are Muslim and wear the scarf during religious prayer and commemoration (*Srebrenica Heroines*, 2022). By donning the headscarf, women can embrace their maternal and religious identity in their advocacy while also drawing transnational connections to bereaved mothers for justice in other contexts.

While these elements of motherhood-based advocacy are purposeful, they also exist within the context of patriarchy, in which essentialist qualities are projected onto women without their agency or consent necessarily. The next section begins to unpack the distinction between strategic and non-strategic essentialism—which in practice are difficult or even impossible to disentangle in representations of women during and after conflict.

When Is Essentialism Strategic?

Women's agential use of patriarchal tropes to mobilize their claims to victimhood and justice is strategic essentialism. In strategic essentialism, women determine which tropes they use and to what political purpose those tropes are mobilized. In cases where essentialism is not strategic, women are the subject of tropes but not the agents determining themselves when and crucially to what political purpose those tropes are used. Definitionally, the distinction between 'essentialism' and 'strategic essentialism' lies

in women's agency and decision-making over the use of essentialist tropes and in their political purpose.

In practice, the distinction between agential and non-agential essentialism is difficult or even impossible to parse. Returning to this dissertation's relational autonomy approach, women have agency and autonomy over their actions and politics, but they are also subject to the constraints of patriarchy. Women may engage strategically in the use of particular tropes to demand truth and justice, but at the same time those tropes may be extrapolated from their original meaning or context and projected onto women in ways they themselves did not intend.

The section below analyzes several cases of essentialism in which there are clear threads of agency and strategy, but it is impossible to disentangle intended meanings from the ways that women are ultimately represented. These cases contribute to the chapter's broader argument that in Northern Ireland, despite some women's engagement in strategic essentialism, other non-agential instances of essentialism neutralize women's claims to justice for maternal harms. Women as mothers are depoliticized in media. In paramilitary murals, political motherhood is portrayed as a mobilizing force for ethno-nationalist struggle rather than for transitional justice advocacy.

Strategic Essentialism and Gender-Based Advocacy for Justice in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, women seeking justice have engaged in strategic essentialism through clear discursive and aesthetic choices that highlight their maternality and identity as mothers. The photography exhibition 'It's Different for Mothers' sponsored by the organization Relatives for Justice is an illustrative case of strategic essentialism in motherhood-based advocacy. The 2023 exhibition publicly displayed sixteen portrait photographs of mothers bereaved during the Northern Ireland conflict. Each mother invited the photographer into her home to capture their portrait, and most of the portraits featured elements of the home and domesticity (Ghréacháin, 2023; McConville, 2023).

Figure 1: 'It's Different for Mothers.' Picture credits to Belfast Media (Ghréacháin, 2023).

Combining elements of private, domestic life with public political advocacy is an effective way for mothers to root their political demands in images of maternality that are familiar and recognizable to their audience. Domestic images of motherhood are 'widely (if not unproblematically) respected' and may 'justify their political participation in the public sphere' especially in patriarchal societies (Mhajne and Whetstone, 2020). The portraits in the 'It's Different for Mothers' exhibition call back to the private experience of grieving a loved one with the effect of engendering feelings of respect and sympathy in the audience.

Crucially, these private elements add depth and humanity to the concept of maternal harm without overshadowing the women's demands for truth-seeking and redress, because political demands for peace and justice were centered in the exhibition. Relatives for Justice produced public statements alongside the exhibition that called attention to maternal harm and the necessity of conceptualizing maternal harm as a 'primary harm' different 'to any other bereavement' (Relatives for Justice, 2023). The exhibition was also a protest against the Legacy Act during its first stages as a bill in parliament (McConville, 2023). The language of human rights, transitional justice, and legacy were present throughout the advertising of the exhibition.

Other cases of gender-based advocacy for post-conflict justice in Northern Ireland featured elements of strategic essentialism. The case of the McCartney sisters is a prominent example. Robert McCartney was killed in 2005 by members of the IRA, after which his five sisters took on a campaign to seek legal justice against the perpetrators. While the McCartney sisters were not bereaved mothers, they were identified as mothers on multiple instances by journalists covering the campaign in local media. The McCartney

sisters engaged in strategic essentialism by mobilizing their campaign for justice through their positionality and identity as mothers and bereaved sisters (Ashe, 2006).

Similarly to the 'It's Different for Mothers' photography exhibition, the McCartney sisters combined elements of private and feminine domestic life with their public politics. One of the sisters did a media interview from her hotel bedroom while wearing a dressing gown and without makeup, in a 'non-threatening, domestic, personal and private way' meant to engender emotion and empathy for her and her sisters' campaign (Ashe 2006, 163). In this interview, the McCartney sister exercised her agency by choosing to incorporate domesticity and maternalism in her public calls for truth and justice. However, as explored in the next section, these essentialist images lie on precarious ground, as they may be extrapolated from the woman's original or intended meaning to emphasize her 'victimization' instead of her politics, and to 'subordinately [hold her] as an idealized subject' rather than an active political participant with agency and demands (Gentry, 2009, 239).

The case of Róisín McAliskey's arrest and her mother Bernadette Devlin's campaign for her release is another example of strategic essentialism in gender-based advocacy for justice in Northern Ireland. In 1996, Róisín was several months pregnant when she was arrested on terrorist charges; she and her mother were both prominent republic activists in Northern Ireland. Bernadette started a campaign to protest the conditions her pregnant daughter was held in and advocated for her release. The campaign to free Róisín frequently emphasized her pregnancy and maternality—for example, a mural in support of Róisín read, 'Free Róisín and her baby' (Whitaker, 2008,

10). Other calls to release Róisín referenced her smallness and frailness as a pregnant woman.

The use of strategic essentialism and emphasis on Róisín's pregnancy generated enough support that a cross-community coalition of activists formed to push for her release, despite her and her mother's history of republicanism. Such a cross-community coalition for justice was rare in Northern Ireland. Róisín was released from prison in 1998. The '"essential link" between women, motherhood, and non-violence' in this instance resulted in some justice with some amount of cross-community organizing (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 36). The next section will explore cases in which this 'essential link' is manipulated to neutralize or co-opt women's calls for justice, explaining in part why motherhood-based advocacy did not become a well-organized mass movement in Northern Ireland as in other states and instead remained a phenomenon of a few rare cases like Róisín's.

Dangers of Essentialism for Motherhood-Based Advocacy in Northern Ireland

Essentialist discourse surrounding bereaved women in Northern Ireland has also been projected onto grieving women without their agency or consent, though. While strategic essentialism can generate support for a specific political demand like truth and justice, essentialism removed from women's agency is used to subordinate women's political demands by presenting their experiences not as targeted political violence but instead as

a domesticated, familial experience of loss and grief. Essentialism can also be co-opted to advance other political causes, such as ethno-nationalism, rather than justice and truth for bereaved mothers.

The danger of characterizing women's activism in essentialist terms is twofold. First, the problem of justice for conflict-related harms may be portrayed as an isolated experience of a few families, rather than a systemic issue that requires a broad policy of redress. Second, failing to conceptualize women as stakeholders in transitional justice may sideline them from policy discussions, rather than centering their experience of maternal harm in the design of redress policies. Essentialism therefore needs to be problematized despite its potential usefulness for women activists in post-conflict states.

Media coverage of funerals during the Northern Ireland conflict tended to focus on bereaved mothers, especially those overcome with emotion on the day. This reporting focused mainly on bereaved mothers' emotions rather than their political demands. Pictures of weeping and grieving mothers were common and continue to feature today in museums and on street posters. These representations of maternal harm are not inaccurate, but they decenter women's political activism.

Figure 2: Newspaper article centering a photo of a bereft mother, published in the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1973, posted in the Loyalist Conflict Museum.

Figure 3: Newspaper article published in the *Derry Journal* in 2022, of a bereaved mother weeping at her son's funeral in 1982, posted outside a home in Derry near the Bogside.

In the same newspaper articles that women pose for photos and give interviews, journalists may stress the women's maternal identity more than the women do

themselves. For example, mothers of the disappeared in the Northern Ireland conflict posed for photographs in newspaper campaigns where they held up portrait photographs of their disappeared sons and demanded truth and justice, similarly to mothers of the disappeared in Latin America, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka; in newspaper articles about Margaret McKinney and Mary McClory, two women well-known for advocating for their disappeared sons, journalists over-emphasized on numerous occasions the women's maternal identity through their own subheadings. A select few include, 'Mums' plea for the return of their sons'; 'Mums' agony'; and 'Heartbroken mums hope for an end to 18-year nightmare' (Carton, 1996).
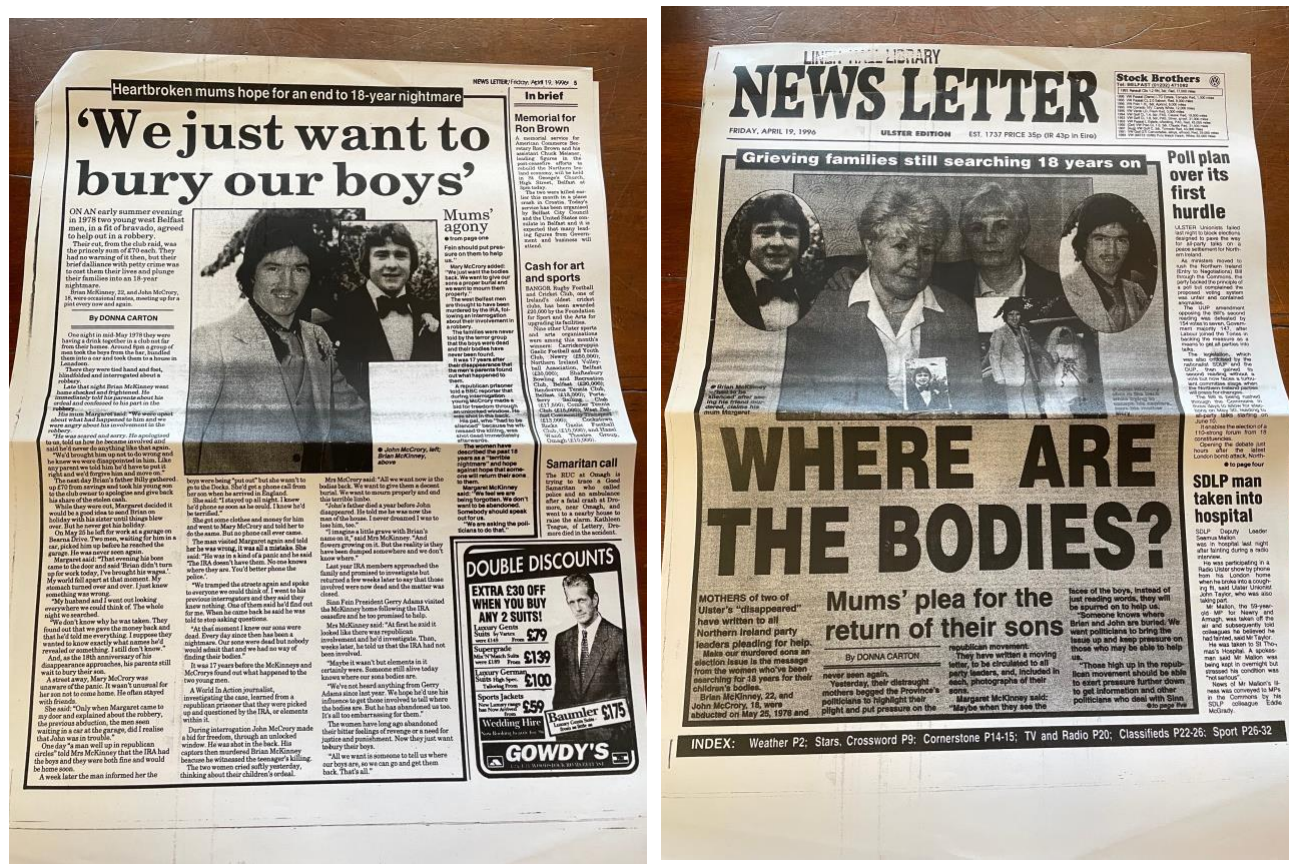
Figure 4: News Letter article on Margaret Delaney and Mary McClory's search for their disappeared sons (Carton, 1996).

In some cases, essentialism may indeed seem to fit within women's campaign for justice, especially where women position themselves as mothers strategically; but the use of essentialist stereotypes by journalists and media rather than by the women themselves is not necessarily positive. While motherhood is clearly an important experience and identity to many women, over-emphasizing maternalism may portray bereaved women's experience of loss as a domestic experience of loss and grief rather than the result of a strategy of terror to inflict maternal harm. Moreover, women's demands for truth and justice may be portrayed as important only to their private experiences of grief and healing, rather than to conflict transformation and transitional justice at large. 'The assumption that women are motivated by the personal dominates' in these

representations, which 'ignore or make little mention of any political agenda'; in this way, a women's participation in politics is portrayed as inherently 'different and apart from a man's participation' (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 129).

The McCartney sisters were also routinely identified by journalists in media coverage as mothers, even when they did not offer that information as relevant to their campaign for justice for their brother's killing (Ashe, 2006). In other newspaper articles examined, journalists had in those cases too inserted the number of children a woman has into their reporting, including where the women were not bereaved of their children. Essentialism was rampant throughout the McCartney sisters' campaign for justice. Media coverage of the McCartney sisters included statements that 'women have a greater moral courage than men' and that women would 'morally redeem' Northern Ireland after the conflict (Ashe, 2006, 163-164). In this way, women's political demands may be reduced to their natural disposition towards morality, rather than attributed to their stake in transitional justice and redressing systematic, gendered patterns of political violence.

Another danger of essentialism lies where women do not fit within or ascribe to the norms of nonviolence and innocence. An essentialist view of women would see them as victims of conflict rather than as perpetrators within paramilitary organizations or state security forces. Indeed, women who engage in violence are often seen in essentialist media representations not as 'women at all but singular mistakes' (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 13). In the case of Róisín McAliskey, while her pregnancy generated sympathy and support for her release, coverage of Róisín herself often focused on her suspected involvement with a republican paramilitary group. Her mother's republicanism was also brought into the conversation in many instances. Róisín and Bernadette's politics of

republicanism ultimately proved to be an obstacle for engendering support among many Protestant coalition members, despite her position as a 'vulnerable' pregnant victim of injustice (Whitaker, 2008).

Nonetheless, women in Northern Ireland did play an important role in both republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations that engaged in political violence. But the role of the 'mother' in those groups has been portrayed in sites of public memory as mostly nonviolent, as either victims of maternal harm or as nonviolent organizers. In these instances, motherhood is essentialized but not strategically for the purpose of generating support for justice for maternal harms; instead, images of the weeping or activist mother are co-opted and mobilized to generate support for ethno-nationalism.

Political Motherhood Co-opted by Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland

In murals, essentialist representations of womanhood and motherhood are sometimes used to mobilize support for ethno-nationalism and paramilitary struggle rather than for justice for maternal harms. Two murals are instrumental examples: the 'Mná na hÉireann' mural in the Bogside neighborhood of Derry, and the Loyalist Prisoners Aid mural on Newtownards Road in East Belfast. Both murals deploy essentialist tropes to depict the role of motherhood in the Northern Ireland conflict, but they depict women not as advocates for transitional justice but instead as members of paramilitary organizations. In these murals, 'maternal agency' is not 'readily translate[d] to a politics of peace,' as the

women are represented as members of groups engaged in political violence (Alderdice, 2023, 13).

Political murals are useful for locating the role of women in ethno-nationalist histories and tales of struggle, conflict, and resilience (Brown, 2012). These murals usually either portray women as passive victims of conflict, or as prominently engaged in ethno-nationalist struggle, such as through involvement in republican or loyalist paramilitaries (Rolston, 2018). Indeed, political murals have been historically important to both republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations for mobilizing support, the vast majority of which are painted by men (Rolston, 2018). 'The interpretation' of these murals in both republican and loyalist communities therefore 'does not allow for the very real forms of women's agency in conflict,' such as their demands for truth and justice for gendered conflict-related harms (Rolston, 2018, 368).

Mná na hÉireann

The title 'Mná na hÉireann' is Irish for 'Women of Ireland' and comes from an Ulster poem. This mural reflects women's vastly diverse experiences in a temporally-extended history of republicanism that stretches back to Ireland's independence from British colonial rule in the 1920s. The women featured in the mural are not only of different time periods, but also of different ages and of both civilian and combatant status. Blanket protests, women sounding bin lids to warn of house raids, combatants in the IRA's women group Cumman na mBan, and bereaved relatives are all featured.

A key scene in the mural is the funeral of an IRA combatant, his tricolor-clad coffin flanked by bereaved female relatives before it is lowered into the ground. A woman in a headscarf, ostensibly the combatant's mother, weeps over the coffin while another older woman in a headscarf and two younger women surround her. This display of grief and its depiction are highly political. The deceased's mother clutches his IRA-distinctive beret and gloves as she weeps over a tricolor flag (Extramural Activity, 2015). She is seen mourning not just her son but a soldier who died in the cause of national unification—indeed, the family's mourning is presented itself as a sacrifice and contribution for the cause of Irish republicanism.

Figure 5: Part of the 'Mná na hÉireann' mural in the Bogside, Derry.

The headscarves worn by the mother and her counterpart are also important, as they could be interpreted as a reference to mothers of the disappeared in Argentina and El Salvador whose headscarves became signature to their campaign and emblematic of transitional justice in their respective countries. The headscarves may serve to construct a transnational relationship between bereaved mothers in Northern Ireland and other contexts. At the least, they are potent symbols of femininity and motherhood, if not transitional justice activism.

While this scene of maternal harm is highly political, it does not have the effect of drawing attention to motherhood-based advocacy for justice or truth. Nor does the mural identify maternal harm as a primary harm resulting from a strategy of terror where the harm of separation plays a central role. Instead, the mother's experience of harm is a sacrifice for the republican movement. Her victimhood is defined not by her gender but by her ethno-nationalist identity; she is a victim of British security forces as are other Catholics and republicans, and although her experience of harm and victimhood are shaped by her motherhood identity, it is interpreted primarily through the lens of sectarianism.

In this way, the mother's experience of harm in this mural is mobilized to construct Catholic and republican victimhood in the Northern Ireland conflict. It is used to emphasize and justify the ongoing cause of republicanism. The mural draws an active relationship of support between motherhood and paramilitarism, rather than between loyalist and republican mothers with similar experiences of maternal harm.

Loyalist Prisoners Aid, Newtownards Road

The Loyalist Prisoners Aid mural on Newtownards Road in East Belfast is another example of mothers in the Northern Ireland conflict depicted not as advocates for justice but as essential members of a paramilitary organization. Loyalist Prisoners Aid was an organization of the Ulster Defense Association where women, including mothers of combatants, played a central role in supporting loyalist prisoners. The mural is accompanied by a description that says, 'During the conflict our women played an important role supporting our prisoners while also keeping the family unit together.'

Here, loyalist mothers are represented in the kitchen—a private, domestic space. The women are preparing food for imprisoned loyalist volunteers, seemingly bangers and mash or an Ulster fry which are distinctive to Northern Irish cuisine. This scene could otherwise be construed as a snapshot of the everyday mundanity of preparing food in a household, if not for the sunglasses donned by the women. Their paramilitary affiliation is revealed through their sunglasses, distinctive of the Ulster Defense Association.

Figure 6: Ulster Defense Association mural on Newtownards Road in East Belfast.

These contrasting elements of private, domestic spaces and public politics are similar to the depictions of the McCartney sisters or mothers of the disappeared explored above. But the political purpose of this mural is clearly to locate women within paramilitary and ethno-nationalist struggle, rather than in transitional justice advocacy. Motherhood is used in this instance as it has been used historically in conflict, to frame nationhood and political struggle (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 36). This representation at once portrays and subverts women's agency, as they acknowledge women's agential role in paramilitary organizations while at the same time publicly projecting essentialist images onto them.

Similarly to the Mná na hÉireann mural in Derry, this Loyalist Prisoners Aid mural interprets women's experiences of the conflict through the lens of ethno-nationalism, rather than constructing a cross-community relationship between Catholic and Protestant

mothers, despite the importance of those coalitions to justice advocacy as in the case of Róisín McAliskey and others.

References to Bereaved Mothers in Other Contexts

Bereaved mothers in other contexts are often referenced in republican murals. Republican political wall art generally references other conflicts, such as in Palestine, South Africa, Catalonia and Latin America; in constructing a relationship of solidarity between Northern Ireland and other indigenous national liberation movements, these murals seek to legitimize and contextualize the importance of the republican cause (Rolston, 2018).

The reference to headscarves in the Mná na hÉireann mural is one example of constructing a transnational relationship between bereaved republican mothers in Northern Ireland with organizations of bereaved mothers engaged in transitional justice advocacy abroad. Another more explicit example is the mural of the Co-Madres in El Salvador, on Northumberland Street in a historically republican neighborhood in West Belfast.

Co-Madres were an organization of mothers of the disappeared in El Salvador during their civil war, which lasted from the late 1970s to early 1990s. The mural replicates a political poster published by the Co-Madres as part of their advocacy campaign, which features their signature headscarf and a grid of boxes which would have been printed with faces of the disappeared at the time. While the mural does not pair bereaved mothers

in Northern Ireland and El Salvador together, it cannot be read apart from the republican context in which it was painted. Read within the broader context of transnational references within republican street art in Northern Ireland, the reference to the Co-Madres is meant to draw comparison and similarity between mothers' experience of conflict in El Salvador and Northern Ireland.

Figure 7: Mural on Newtownards Road in West Belfast depicting the Co-Madres in El Salvador.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has shown that while some women in Northern Ireland have used strategic essentialism to advance their claims to justice, in other instances essentialist tropes are projected onto them with the effect of neutralizing any claims to justice. Women's experience of maternal harm may be painted a natural maternal reaction to loss and a collateral of conflict, rather than a mobilizing force for justice and conflict transformation. In other instances, political motherhood is used to mobilize support for ethno-nationalist struggle and paramilitarism.

The co-optation of motherhood in these murals to promote ethno-nationalism reflect a broader theme in the transitional justice landscape of Northern Ireland: that ethno-nationalism and sectarianism continue to define and divide women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland. The next chapter develops this point further, to argue that ethno-nationalist identity also defines and divides women's attitudes toward transitional justice and therefore their engagement in transitional justice advocacy.

Chapter 5: Ethno-Nationalist Identity Shapes Women's Transitional Justice Attitudes and Engagement in Northern Ireland

This chapter argues that an additional reason why a prevalent motherhood-based transitional justice advocacy movement never formed in Northern Ireland is because ethno-nationalist identity defines and divides women's attitude toward and engagement with transitional justice mechanisms. Whereas Catholic nationalist women generally support transitional justice to redress the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict, Protestant unionist women are more distrustful of those mechanisms or even opposed. Moreover, Protestant women may face social or political pressure to not engage with transitional justice mechanisms, including within women's coalitions for justice. In keeping with a relational autonomy approach, this chapter recognizes women's agency in Northern Ireland while also recognizing the social and political constraints of patriarchy and a deeply divided society.

This chapter adds detail to the overall argument that sectarianism and ethno-national identity, rather than gender, persist in defining and dividing women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland. This point is central to understanding the relative lack of motherhood-based advocacy among unionist women in Northern Ireland, compared to several individual cases of motherhood-based advocacy among nationalist women—and crucially, compared to mass movements of mothers advocating for justice in other post-conflict and deeply divided contexts.

Local Attitudes Toward Gender, Victimhood, and Transitional Justice

Women's engagement with transitional justice advocacy and institutions is not merely a product of their ethno-nationalist identity and beliefs—gender is centrally important as are other social and political pressures. This section will show the nuances of how gender dominate even within ethno-nationalist narratives of victimhood; at the same time, this section also argues that women's attitudes towards transitional justice and their engagement with transitional justice advocacy are shaped strongly by their ethno-nationalist identity and communities.

Religious and ethno-nationalist affiliation is a strong predictor of victims' attitudes toward approaches to deal with the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict (Brewer and Hayes, 2015, 519). While an estimated seventy percent of Catholic nationalist victims of conflict-related violence would support the creation of an official truth commission—a core transitional justice mechanism—only about thirty percent of Protestant unionist victims would support one (Brewer and Hayes, 2015, 517). Unionist women are therefore far less likely than nationalist women to support or advocate for transitional justice mechanisms.

Contributing most to unionists' distrust of formal truth and justice mechanisms is their belief that formal truth-seeking mechanisms will be coopted by republican elites to 'create a moral equivalence between all victims,' i.e., between civilians and paramilitary

members such as IRA combatants (Brewer and Hayes, 2015, 516). The distinction between 'innocent' and culpable victims of conflict is made unmistakably clear in unionists' own community-based truth and justice initiatives. A walk down the Shankill or Newtownards Road reveals several sites of public memory, dedicated to 'innocent' civilians killed in IRA bombings. One prominent display on the Shankill spells out boldly: 'No enquiries! No truth! No justice!'

Figure 8: A unionist site of memory on the Shankill Road in East Belfast.

The unionist community has thus developed a 'hierarchy of victimhood,' wherein civilians and members of official security forces are seen as innocent and 'respectable' victims, whereas people affiliated with or belonging to paramilitary organizations are seen as 'non-respectable' (Lundy and McGovern, 2008, 57). These narratives of 'innocence'

and 'victimhood' are deeply gendered. Unionist sites of public memory centrally feature pictures and names of young children and babies killed or injured alongside their mothers in IRA bombings; walking tours emphasize the killing of 'women and children' as justification for 'self-defense' during the conflict. The grouping of 'women and children' has historically been used to engender sympathy and support for violent struggle, while obscuring the deliberate gender-based perpetration of conflict-related harm and thus rendering women as one-dimensional victims of war (Enloe, 2014).

At the same time, the gendered narrative of victimhood within unionism is nuanced and not all women are seen as 'respectable' or sympathetic victims of conflict. Women relatives of loyalist paramilitary members often face alienation and stigma within unionist communities (Lundy and McGovern, 2008, 57; Potter and MacMillan, no date, 26). Women engaged in paramilitarism in some respects defy essentialist stereotypes of mothers as inherently nonviolent and apolitical, and 'violent women are [seen] not [as] women at all but [as] singular mistakes' (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 13). While women's contribution to loyalism is in some instances celebrated and exhibited—such as in the Loyalist Prisoner's Aid mural on Newtownards Road discussed in the last chapter—other times women's involvement or association with paramilitaries becomes a source of stigma. Women in unionist communities are often expected to remain in the private domestic and 'subordinate' space and avoid becoming overtly or publicly political, at the risk of affecting their social status and community support (Potter and MacMillan, no date, 25-26). This chapter will later connect the ongoing role of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland with women's decision to publicly engage or not with transitional justice advocacy and institutions.

Returning to the narrative of 'innocence' in victimhood, fears of transitional justice mechanisms legitimizing republicans' claims to victimhood contribute to unionists' perception of transitional justice as illegitimate. Unionists are hesitant or opposed to supporting truth and justice mechanisms that would treat republican paramilitary members and civilians as equal victims of conflict-related harms. Nationalists on the other hand would support transitional justice mechanisms that treat all victims of conflict-related harm equally—this discrepancy largely explains why unionist and nationalist women have not formed a mass motherhood-based movement for transitional justice. Individual case studies of unionist and nationalist joint advocacy for justice are explored further below.

Moreover, loyalist paramilitary members are generally distrustful or opposed to transitional justice mechanisms because of their reluctance to criticize the state. Although loyalists themselves were policed, surveilled, and faced some of these same violations during the conflict although to a lesser degree, loyalists are still reluctant to criticize the state or engage in human rights discourse that places the onus of responsibility for conflict-related harms on state security forces (Lundy and McGovern, 2008, 58). Supporting truth and justice initiatives for violations perpetrated by the state is perceived largely negatively within loyalist communities due to this expectation of unbetraying loyalty.

As mentioned, nationalist views on transitional justice vary greatly from unionists' views. Whereas seventy-six percent of Protestant victims would support victimhood identity being 'restricted exclusively to "innocent" victims of terrorist activities,' only forty-one percent of Catholics agree (Brewer and Hayes, 2015, 521). Just about sixty-four percent of Protestants agree that 'all those bereaved' by the Northern Ireland conflict

should be considered a victim, compared to an overwhelming eighty-nine percent of Catholics (Brewer and Hayes, 2015, 522).

Innocence in victimhood is not entirely unimportant to nationalists—indeed, innocence narratives are sometimes mobilized by nationalist communities to criticize and hold the state accountable for killing children and other civilians, whereas unionists are more reluctant to criticize the state. Many Catholic victims of harm, including bereaved mothers, have petitioned for inquests at least in part to establish the innocence of their loved ones at the time they were killed. For example, the Saville Inquiry into the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry was the result of years of campaigning from the families of the victims, who wanted their relatives including children recognized as innocent victims of unjustifiable force. Kathleen Duffy had taken an inquest into her son Seamus' killing at least in part to prove his innocence when he was killed (*Kathleen Duffy*, 2013).

For these reasons and more, nationalists in Northern Ireland have generally advocated for and embraced formal truth and justice mechanisms. Indeed, all of the examples of motherhood-based advocacy for justice discussed in the last chapter were led by Catholic women. Nationalists and republicans in Northern Ireland have long used human rights and transitional justice discourse to frame their claims to victimhood and justice and to seek solidarity for their cause. Phrases like 'state violence' and 'internment without trial' are central to nationalist activism and were focal-points of both the nationalist-led civil rights movement and the republican movement during the conflict (Whitaker, 2008, 11).

Yet republican and nationalist women lack a prevalent or centralized motherhood-based transitional justice advocacy group akin to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo or Mothers of Srebrenica. As explained in the last chapter, republican and nationalist women's claims to maternal harm can be co-opted to advance ethno-nationalist narratives of victimhood and claims to 'collective' justice. This narrative of 'collective' justice for nationalists, rather than society-wide transitional justice or gender-based justice for maternal harms, is explored further below.

As explored earlier as well, there have been some cases of unionists and nationalists advocating together for justice for maternal harm, such as in the case of Róisín McAliskey. Moreover, some nationalist campaigns for justice have made concerted efforts to downplay sectarianism and ethno-nationalism in favor of emphasizing gender and maternalism; the McCartney sisters are one example, in their attempt to balance political demands for justice with the 'natural' and 'non-sectarian' act of grieving their male family members (Ashe, 2006, 164). Nonetheless, ethno-nationalism continues to dominate in how women's demands for justice are perceived and portrayed in Northern Ireland.

The following section continues to unpack the role of sectarianism and ethno-nationalism in preventing motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice in Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on unionist and loyalist women. Taking a relational autonomy approach, women's decision to engage in transitional justice activism is understood as both an expression of their agency and also subject to concrete social and political constraints, as women navigate ongoing patriarchy and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

Ethno-Nationalism Defines and Divides Women's Engagement with Transitional Justice

Conflict-related cleavages between unionist and nationalist women are an ongoing obstacle to motherhood-based transitional justice advocacy in Northern Ireland, a key part of understanding why a mass movement of motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice never formed in Northern Ireland. This dissertation takes a relational autonomy approach that sees women as agents of their own attitudes and decisions, but at the same time recognizes the social and political constraints facing women in Northern Ireland as both a patriarchal and deeply divided society.

The political and social constraints facing women as they decide whether to engage in transitional justice advocacy are several. First, casting and discrediting women 'as "bad" mothers unworthy of the respect typically reserved for motherhood' has also been a tool of social and political control weaponized against women in across conflict settings and is relevant to Northern Ireland as well (Mhajne and Whetstone, 2020, 170). Second, 'accusations of betrayal' against women for engaging in transitional justice advocacy that places the onus of responsibility for redressing conflict-related abuses on the state would be an especially strong deterrent in unionist and loyalist communities because of the normative primacy on 'loyalty' (Lundy and McGovern, 2008, 53). Third, women in both republican and loyalist communities face heightened levels of social control, intimidation, and coercion by paramilitaries, including surveillance and physical, financial, psychological and emotional abuse (Hughes, 2022).

It is within this context that unionist or loyalist women may choose not to engage in transitional justice advocacy—even those in the minority of Protestants that would support transitional justice to deal with the legacy of the conflict. Crucially, while unionist women may have faced pressure within their own communities not to engage in transitional justice, they may also feel sidelined within transitional justice advocacy spaces, especially if those spaces are dominated by nationalists. Nationalist discourses of 'collective justice' and blaming unionism for patterns of violence and impunity are not necessarily dominant but certainly exist, and they may serve to reinforce rather than overcome cleavages between unionist and nationalist women (e.g., Friel, 1999; 'Families Who Lost Loved Ones,' 1999).

Returning to the case of Róisín McAliskey, even within a rare cross-community coalition of women and mothers for justice that formed during the conflict, some Protestant women felt alienated within the coalition because of their ethno-nationalist identity. First, the republican elite Martin McGuinness in one speech framed justice for Róisín McAliskey as a form of collective justice for Irish nationalists and republicans, which would have alienated participating Protestant women (Whitaker, 2008, 11). Indeed, such a statement would seemingly confirm unionist fears that republicans would co-opt transitional justice to advance their community's interests.

Other Protestant women in the coalition advocating for Róisín's release became uncomfortable when Róisín became a symbol used by nationalist party Sinn Féin to garner political support (Whitaker, 2008, 16). Rather than feeling integrated into the campaign as equals, Protestant members of the coalition felt tokenized and included or featured only to legitimize the campaign as a cross-community initiative (Whitaker, 2008,

17). These experiences of struggling to overcome ethno-nationalist identity in favor of gender or motherhood identity likely contributed to the lack of centrally-organized mass movement of motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter contributed to the overall argument that ethno-nationalism in addition to gender is central to understanding women's engagement in transitional justice advocacy in Northern Ireland. This chapter explored three aspects of women's choice of whether to engage in transitional justice advocacy—their attitudes toward transitional justice, the social and political pressures of a patriarchal and deeply divided society, and their feeling of inclusion and plurality within transitional justice advocacy spaces and coalitions. This chapter has added detail to the overall argument that ethno-national identity persists in defining and dividing women's claims to victimhood and justice in Northern Ireland, a central point in understanding the relative lack of motherhood-based transitional justice advocacy in this context.

Conclusion

This dissertation has made key observations about the reasons why motherhood-based advocacy for transitional justice was not as prevalent or well-organized in Northern Ireland as in other post-conflict states like Argentina, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka. Crucially, ethno-national identity defines and divides women's claims to victimhood and attitudes towards transitional justice in Northern Ireland, despite both Protestant and Catholic women's shared experience of maternal harm as a weapon of terror used during the conflict.

Chapter 3 argued that in Northern Ireland, maternal harm was a purposeful part of the strategy of terror used by state and non-state forces. Through analysis of women's oral histories, the chapter highlighted illustrative cases where perpetrators of maternal harm understood the profound nature of the harm that they committed. The oral histories showed that maternal harm was experienced by women across the conflict divide.

Chapter 4 introduced the concept of 'strategic essentialism,' or the agential use of essentialist tropes by women to organize, stake claims to victimhood, and make political demands for truth and justice. While strategic essentialism was a component of women's advocacy in Northern Ireland, the chapter also developed the argument that women were essentialized in non-agential ways that neutralized or co-opted their claims to victimhood and justice. In some cases, media painted women's experience of maternal harm as a natural maternal reaction to loss and a collateral of conflict, rather than as a mobilizing force for justice and conflict transformation. In other cases, paramilitary organizations used images of political motherhood to mobilize their own narratives of ethno-nationalist victimhood, struggle, and collective justice.

Chapter 5 further developed the point that victimhood identity in Northern Ireland is articulated and negotiated through the lens of ethno-nationalism rather than gender in important ways that precluded Protestant women from engaging in transitional justice advocacy. The chapter made three main points. First, ethno-nationalist identity shapes women's attitudes toward transitional justice. Second, unionist women face social and political pressures not to engage in justice advocacy. Third, ethno-nationalist cleavages continue to alienate women within coalitions for justice.

This dissertation makes key contributions to scholarship and could enhance advocates' understanding of the main issues in transitional justice in Northern Ireland. As a feminist research project, this dissertation seeks to have productive and transformative value for women and organizations in Northern Ireland engaged in gender-based transitional justice advocacy. This dissertation reveals challenges and strengths that women's groups in Northern Ireland face in advocating for truth and redress. Discerning and unpacking these challenges to transitional justice is especially important in Northern Ireland given the United Kingdom's long and recent history of state impunity.

Returning to the image of the political mother during conflict, perhaps the most powerful aspect of these scenes are not the headscarves, banners, or photographs that aesthetically define the movement, but the feeling of hope in contexts of repression and impunity. Women engaged in transitional justice advocacy represent some of the fiercest defenders of human rights in local and global context. It is this understanding that first motivated this dissertation and a fitting point on which to conclude, in recognition of women engaged in political motherhood across Northern Ireland and abroad.

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