

The Role of Women in Truth Recovery Processes

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Victims/Survivors ...

- + 91% of those who died were male
- + Bereaved were disproportionately female
- + Women "left behind" to deal with results (sometime with unborn children)
- + Mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives, aunts, daughters
- + Men too, obviously, were survivors as well as victims (sons, husbands etc...) and they have particular gender-related problems which should never be minimised although not within the ambit of this talk

Women ...

- Nurtured the vulnerable (old and young)
- Raised children
- Comforted and cared for the sick
- Bore loss/visited graves
- Visited prisoners
- Felt (were) powerless
- Hid their grief from family/society
- Sometimes led unbearably lonely lives

Financial Cost to Women

(Contrasted with state-assessed "worth" of women!)

- Civilian victims often received poor compensation (sometimes only funeral costs of about a thousand pounds)
- Widow's Pension was never intended for young mothers with children
- One family of nine children in Armagh, for example, maintained themselves for a decade by peeling apples in a dark, cold shed
- Women's lives counted for little/nothing
- One family in Derry, for example, who lost their mother received under £90 in compensation

Peace Process Winners and Losers

(Everyone a winner from relative peace, but ...)

- Men disproportionately responsible for both the conflict and the peace
- If men “created” the detail of the process:
- Women’s stories were/are missed
- Women’s economic outcomes disregarded
- Men may wish to protect the “integrity” of the process despite the cost to women
- Women’s role minimised and disregarded

Women and Truth-Telling

- Women so used to minimising their loss, they do not express their stories
- Women feel their stories are not worth telling
- Women fear their stories may re-ignite old conflicts
- And that they must “move on for the sake of the family” and society
- Women fear re-traumatising themselves and others

Are some women “more equal than others”?

- Some women have managed to get their stories heard
- If they are strongly-motivated and their story “fits” a political agenda
- Other women’s stories are not heard
- Eg the victims of state violence
- They have watched as other groups in society, eg RUC widows, are properly compensated
- Women have watched in anger and bewilderment considering their own predicaments
- This has re-traumatised them and made them feel worthless

TRUTH OR THERAPY?

(Or as a PFC colleague calls it "foot-rubbing - or the facts?)

- False dichotomy to say one or the other
- Women need to hear the truth about how their loved-ones died
- And who was responsible at both a societal and individual level
- They also need to try and make sense of the "wasted years" of silence, lies and pain
- And to deal with a false sense of guilt that they "didn't do anything about it until now"
- They deserve all the help they can get – whether that be the truth or therapies such as reflexology/massage etc
- And the respect of state authorities and an apology if merited and desired

Confidentiality

- The details of these four cases have been changed to maintain privacy
- Nothing has been changed of any significance to affect the import of their cases
- If anything, the real horror of their stories remains hidden to maintain privacy

Grandmother, rural Co. Down (RIP)

- Woman left with nine children
- No significant compensation (Widow's Pension)
- Sister advised silence on nature of bereavement
- Feared sons becoming paramilitaries so never spoke of dead husband/father
- Long-term illness from effects of psychological harm/poverty
- Died young - story never told

Grandmother, County Armagh

- Mother of six children
- Husband was killed by bomb – she witnessed
- Brother also shot dead
- Moved home after husband's killing
- Raised six children in a house bought from miniscule compensation payment and help of neighbours

Portadown Mother (RIP)

- Mother in same room as son who was murdered in bombing
- She was herself seriously injured
- House wrecked in bomb
- Husband suffered serious emotional injury
- Raised four other sons
- Died aged 48 – story remains untold and unheard

County Tyrone Grandmother

- Women witnessed husband's death in their home
- Police made mistakes when taking her statement
- Statement ruled in-admissable by DPP
- Woman has lived close to perpetrator for years
- Many still believe victim was politically-connected and therefore "to blame" for his own murder
- Blames herself for failure to prosecute
- Feels she has failed her husband, her children and society - as murderer went on to kill many more

Relative Wo/Men strengths

- Without wanting to reinforce gender stereotypes ...
- Men tend to be more analytical, forensic, fact-based:
- Their questions: "WHO DID THIS AND HOW?"
- Women see context, outcomes, effects on family:
- "WHAT DID IT MEAN FOR THEM?"

Common Themes

- Families who did not openly discuss their loss
- Parents “protecting” children – Silence!
- Children “protecting” parents – Silence!
- Loss transcending the generations – grandchildren asking “Why have I only got one Grandad?”
- Siblings distanced by their mutual silence
- “Survivor guilt” un-challenged

Truth Process

- It must ensure the proportionate use of women as interlocutors, researcher and archivists
- It must pro-actively seek out women rather than expecting them to come forward
- Women's particular issues must be addressed – the outcomes of violence on individuals, societies, families
- It must be victim-focussed – not a mechanism for government/political/paramilitary vindication/exculpation

Counselling

- Generally thought that women find it easier to ask for help than men
- True, but help not always available
- Women also feel they are “letting the side down” by admitting they need help
- Women fear their close relatives will feel they have failed them and are reluctant to ask for help

Speaking is Not the Same as Being Heard

- If women speak and are not heard by a mass audience, their marginalisation is worsened
- Mainstream media may (will) tire of reporting women's stories
- A mechanism must be put in place to ensure women's stories appear in the mass media in a way that is sensitive, direct, accessible
- Seeing something written down, officially-recognised, is in itself often helpful

To Avoid ...

- Undue political influence – politicians exculpating themselves or their community
- Undue legal influence – lawyers have very different priorities from families
- Eames/Bradley had some good ideas – so why re-invent the wheel ...
- DELAY!

A PLEA

- Witnesses (also perpetrators) are dying
- Memories are being lost by the day, week, month
- Truth is disappearing
- Rights are not being addressed before the grave
- A truth process must come soon or it will be too late
- It is already too late for many

Examples:

- Mother/grandmother died two months ago but was already suffering from Alzheimers and could not participate in HET inquiry into her husband's death
- Widow died two years ago, before the HET inquiry began into her husband's death
- Orphans who emigrated cannot be contacted about HET inquiry into their parents murders

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

- Politicians in Ireland and Britain are failing to grasp the need to push ahead with a truth process
- Without full state participation/accountability there is little chance the paramilitaries will step up to the plate
- As writer Brian Feeney asked this week – are they simply waiting for victims to die?
- Their excuse? There is no consensus
- Where was the consensus for Patten reforms of policing or setting up the Police Ombudsman's office?
- Those already victimised and marginalised are suffering yet another injustice
- Victims and survivors have already paid a heavy price
- Time waits for no-one – let's get on with it!

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Seriously question yourself – are you prepared to vote for your “usual” party if it shows no willingness to tackle the past?
- Support the work of victims’ groups – whichever side of the community you come from
- Ask politicians you meet about these issues, they must not be allowed to get away with just asking people already grievously hurt to “move on”
- There is money enough for death and war – funding must be found to comfort the living
- Given goodwill, the finance needed would not be prohibitive

Finally ...

- The scale of suffering out there is huge and greatly under-estimated
- I have worked for 30 years as a journalist in NI, with a special interest in explaining victims' stories
- Even I am taken aback by the number and severity of the untold stories
- We need to do all we can to alleviate and recognise the suffering of all, both men and women