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Subtitles



ABORTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND QUESTION

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Bridging the Local and Global

Northern/Ireland Reproductive Healthcare

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This research is part of the broader project, *Bridging the Local and Global: Archiving Women's Collectives in Spaces of Action/Reflection*, which is a collaboration between the Durham University, Newcastle University and the University of Oxford and seeks to strengthen the link between the global imaginaries of local actors.

Introduction

This project investigates the potential of narrative interviews to facilitate archiving women collectives in spaces of action/reflection; and how the use of physical and non-physical spaces, as well as silence, by women collectives in post-colonialist contexts, impact on processes of archiving.

The case study used for this inquiry is reform of abortion law in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Abortion reform in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

The project explores the creation and activities of women collectives in relation to significant 'constitutional moments' in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

- The constitutional moment in the Republic of Ireland under consideration is the vote in favour of repealing article Article 40.3.3° , predominately made up of the Eighth Amendment, of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Constitution of Ireland 1937 which placed the right to life of the foetus on an equal footing to the right to life of a pregnant woman as far as practicable.
- The constitutional moment identified in Northern Ireland is the repeal of sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (OAPA) which made it an offence to procure a miscarriage or assist in procuring a miscarriage. The OAPA provisions were repealed by an Act of Parliament in Westminster, section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2019.

Engaging with both jurisdictions facilitates a comparison and overlap between how the different post-colonial legal and political arrangements in shaped activism. One involves a popular vote through a referendum campaign. The period of



campaigning we have selected as the basis for this project is between the March 2018 when the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) vote to hold the referendum, and the 26th of May 2018, when it was announced that the electorate had voted yes to repeal Article 40.3.3°. The other involves legislative reform outside Northern Ireland in Westminster through an opportunistic amendment in legislation whose primary purpose was to facilitate the formation of an executive in Northern Ireland after a period of suspension of government.

We also explore the extent to which borders separating legal and political jurisdictions, and territories, shaped the spaces within which women collectives operated: how the barriers of borders were overcome to achieve a 'universal' common purpose; and how one group of activists could learn from another group in a different jurisdiction about using various spaces and silences to achieve their ends.



We explore the capabilities and limitations of narrative interviews as feminist vehicles for archiving, ensuring local knowledge and local voices are front and centre in recounting the endeavours and achievements of women collectives.

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Who did we interview?

We interviewed 11 participants.

(1) We approached individuals from counties outside Dublin who had **not undertaken long form academic interviews to recount their experiences during the campaign nor to recount personal archives**. We wanted to find stories that may not necessarily have been told before. For example, we wanted to interview the experiences of those in Donegal which was a county that voted No in the referendum, and Sligo, which had voted Yes but for whom no abortion services had been provided since the referendum at the time of interview.

(2) We approached individuals situated in Irish counties, and in England and Scotland, who were **operating at, or across, a border**. This included counties on the North/South Ireland border (Donegal, Derry, Down, Louth, Leitrim, Cavan) England/South Ireland border (including diaspora engagement), England/North Ireland border, Scotland/North Ireland border.

What was our method?

We used narrative interviews. Fehér (2011) outlines the sub-sessions of a narrative interview:

- a single, carefully constructed, introductory, narrative question is provided. The interviewee remains silent for a long time and listens. They do not interrupt the story-telling to ask further questions.
- When the story is finished, the interviewer might ask the interviewee to speak more about certain events that have been mentioned and then wait for the story to be developed without asking further questions.

The same generative question was posed for each of the 11 participants. The only modification made was when a participant participated in only one jurisdiction.

The generative question was as follows:

“In this project, we are hoping to learn about what it was like to campaign in different locations and spaces, physical and nonphysical or online, for the reform of abortion on the island of Ireland, and how these experiences were documented or recorded. Could you please tell us about your experiences of engaging with activism in the reform of abortion on the island of Ireland, please?”

The format of a narrative interview produced a rich data base with the agency of the interviewee front and centre.

Key Themes

In this research we explored the following key themes:

- Silence
- Physical Spaces: Formal/Informal, Public/Private
- Non-Physical Spaces: Formal/Informal, Public/Private

Informal spaces includes the ability to access non-urban spaces (the countryside or small villages), as well as urban spaces, where permission to demonstrate in key locations in major cities (Harvey (1973); Fletcher 2020) may be conditioned by geopolitical circumstances.



Dublin Castle after 8th Referendum results declared. Source: Katenolan1979



Key Questions:

Silences: To what extent is silence important for achieving the goals of women collectives (Parpart (2009); Parpart and Parashar, (2020))? How does the instrumentalization of silence in women collectives affect the archive and documentation of events? To what extent are private and/or confidential platforms important for fulfilling aspirations (telephone conversations, text messages, informal meetings, email threads)? To what extent are physical/non-physical private spaces of action and reflection used to ensure silence? What other functions do those spaces perform? To what extent is anonymity of participants in women collectives key to empowering them to achieve their goals? Is there a responsibility to archive and does silence/anonymity form a tension with archiving women collectives? Do we have to think creatively about alternative conceptions of archiving in this context?

Formal/Informal, Public/Private, Physical Spaces: Which types of public spaces are instrumental in fulfilling aspirations of women collectives, particularly where (post)colonial dynamics are at play? How was public art and posters used to take up space? What formal public spaces were used (e.g. courts, executive, parliament)? To what extent are private physical spaces crucial for women's collectives? Are there challenges to protecting those spaces?

Formal/Informal, Public/Private, Non-Physical Spaces: How are spaces of action/reflection created through online/social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)? How does it present challenges and opportunities for women collectives? Does it facilitate micro-social relations that can form spaces of action and reflection (Ceuterick (2020)? For example, can hashtags create space (Willis (2020))? Are there challenges or threats presented to women collectives in using this space?


Dr Jane Rooney and Alana Farrell



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Alana Farrell is a PhD researcher at the University of Birmingham. Her thesis focuses on the impact of law on the sharing of abortion information in Ireland. Her research interests include reproductive justice, the interactions of law and information in the area of healthcare, and histories of activism.

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<https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/gender-law/research/current-projects/bridging-the-local-and-global-archiving-womens-collectives-in-spaces-of-actionreflection/>

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