



GFA@25: Freedom from harassment or ongoing intimidation?

On the 25th anniversary of the 1998 Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement (GFA), we have decided to focus this special edition of Just News on the scale and adequacy of the state response to the ongoing and worsening intimidation of civil society actors in this jurisdiction. We would like to reflect on the extent to which relevant GFA commitments and human rights law 'duties to protect' have been realised in practice, twenty five years on.

In recent years, we have become increasingly concerned at the direct impact, but also broader chilling effect of attacks on many civil society actors. Shrinking civic space is an increasing problem in many jurisdictions. The Northern Ireland dimension also relates to the risk of paramilitary-linked intimidation and threats, with people living in areas of loyalist paramilitary control particularly vulnerable.

In late 2019, we held an Equality Coalition seminar on the experiences of human rights defenders (HRDs), amidst noting an increasingly hostile environment. This included the experiences of NGOs, academics, and lawyers working on legacy cases; campaigners against housing inequality and poverty; women's rights advocates; and journalists.

Since that time, our concern has increased further in response to the incessant online vitriol and 'flak' that can be faced by women in public life, HRDs, academics, journalists, and other activists, including those campaigning on constitutional issues, or even those commenting on Brexit and the Protocol.

Intimidation is of course nothing new in this jurisdiction. Introducing a specific offence of 'intimidation' was one of the last Acts of the Stormont Parliament in 1969 as Northern Ireland descended into conflict.

The very first paragraph of the 'Human Rights' section of the GFA can be read as an intention to redress and reset such a context. The rights

'affirmed' by the parties to the GFA in this section lead off with "rights to free political thought; the right to freedom and expression of religion; the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations; the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means;".

Two other rights "to freely choose one's place of residence" and "freedom from sectarian harassment" address a context whereby housing intimidation should be a thing of the past. This relevant section of the GFA (pictured below - click to read a full size version) also affirms "the right of women to full and equal political participation". Harassment of women in public life is clearly a major barrier to such a right being realised.

Whatever the origin of these commitments, they give the impression the post-GFA reality was to be very different to what came before. 25 years on it is important to take stock of how far away from this reality we remain.

This edition of Just News includes a number of articles from civil society representatives concerning their contemporary experiences. It also includes a report of our recent Equality Coalition 'chill factor' event to discuss the experiences of the sector, which was held in UNISON's Belfast office and conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

RIGHTS, SAFEGUARDS AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

HUMAN RIGHTS

1. The parties affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community. Against the background of the recent history of communal conflict, the parties affirm in particular:

- the right of free political thought;
- the right to freedom and expression of religion;
- the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations;
- the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means;
- the right to freely choose one's place of residence;
- the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity;
- the right to freedom from sectarian harassment; and
- the right of women to full and equal political participation.

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What is the ‘chill factor’? Unpacking the intimidation of civil society in Northern Ireland

The Equality Coalition

In late March 2023 the Equality Coalition held a closed roundtable discussion on the intimidation of civil society in Northern Ireland, and the resulting ‘chill factor’ experienced by activists, academics, and organisations working towards equality and the advancement of human rights.

We wanted to get a sense of how the rising intimidation facing our membership affects the realisation of the promises in the Good Friday Agreement, specifically the right of free political thought; the right to freedom from sectarian harassment; the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means; and the right of women to full and equal political participation.

Discussion focused on how the intimidation manifests, the impact of it, and whether we can collectively develop strategies to address it.

“We are not just civic society, we are human beings.”

Common themes of the abuse and harassment experienced by activists include the overarching prevalence of misogynistic abuse across all representations of activism in the room. For example, among the harassment and intimidation faced by Irish language activists on social media, it was reported to be significantly worse for women than men.

Women activists describe the abuse they face because of their jobs as demoralising and dismissive, and state that as activists they are seen as ‘fair game’ for abuse because part of their job is to challenge political structures that impact the communities they serve. They know that this is unfair, but may feel a responsibility to protect others, with one participant saying: “I don’t want to be resilient. But I also feel that its better for the abuse to come to me over more vulnerable people”.

Abuse and harassment directed at the LGBTQIA+ community was discussed as being particularly on the rise, including opposition to transgender people (trans women in particular) being increasingly part of far right discourse (in addition to racism) leading to a climate of increased harassment.

While online abuse over social media is prevalent, what was also discussed was the tangible impact of this abuse in real life. Activists have faced swatting (hoax emergency

calls to the police with the goal of a potentially violent police encounter); their addresses being posted online and photos of them being posted; reputational damage and its resulting impact on career prospects; and bomb threats at offices.

The other main theme across all areas was that the primary source of the intimidation was deemed to be coming from certain elements of loyalism. For activists in the Irish language community or the women’s sector, this type of harassment and intimidation has been somewhat normalised and even expected. Activists living and working in loyalist areas also expressed that they have only experienced intimidation and harassment from within their own community, particularly if their activism challenges loyalist control of an area or political space. For women activists living in loyalist areas, loyalist intimidation is deeply dangerous and traumatising, with activists forced to move out of their house for weeks on end and being required to have police monitoring their homes for years. These activists were forced to consider leaving their communities and their jobs for the safety of themselves and their families.

“It is not just the chill factor; it feels like we are actually frozen.”

This abuse and harassment often ends up having the desired effect, namely it prevents activists from effectively doing their job out of fear of the potential repercussions. One participant pointed out that when experts in their respective areas are silenced, “fundamentally the question is then what is filling that gap”.

All participants described that online and real-life intimidation has impacted their work to an extent. Although there is a tendency to normalise the abuse, to prepare for it, or to try to laugh it off, it makes everyone feel extra cautious in what they say and how they say it, not because they are afraid of making a mistake professionally, but because they are afraid of the backlash from (generally) loyalism.

Underlying much of the intimidation are paramilitary threats, which are often implied online in vaguely threatening language (for example, “you shouldn’t say that if you know what’s good for you”), but which have direct consequences.

“We don’t receive State support when we follow the rules but people who break the rules do.”

Another main theme that emerged during the roundtable was the inaction (and occasionally facilitation) of the intimidation by the state, with politicians and the PSNI specifically mentioned. Attendees identified that a major

issue contributing to the intimidation is the political cover provided by elements of some unionist parties.

One activist stated: “The online abuse is not anonymous, comments are started by people with power who we know. The reaction to those comments is then enormous and amplified.”

Concerns were raised that senior political actors within unionism had tried to influence public authorities into silencing academics who are engaged in research on topics relating to constitutional change and Brexit.

Another area of concern and discussion was the possible links between the far right, elements of loyalism, loyalist paramilitaries, and others in the creation and maintenance of various forms of intimidation and harassment faced by activists, often when the activism was either perceived as minimising the control of loyalism or if the activism focused on the Irish language, immigration, LGBTQIA+ issues, reproductive rights, and certain other issues affecting women. However, participants noted the importance of singling out the specific sources of intimidation within communities so that the entire community was not blamed for the actions of a number of individuals with power within the community.

Activists also raised concerns that the PSNI are complicit in the intimidation they face, by seeming to adopt an attitude of ‘you knew what you were getting into’ in relation to harassment faced by activists engaged in work that upsets the far right, such as the defence of reproductive rights and the rights of migrants. It was claimed that when the perpetrators of the intimidation ‘break the rules’ (for example, not getting permission for a protest or actually committing a crime) they are treated with a light hand, but activists have to be constantly vigilant or risk a fine or PSNI involvement. One participant said, “We have to do everything right because if we don’t we’ll be challenged in a way that others are not.”

“Nobody is alone in this.”

Various strategies for addressing the intimidation were discussed. An overarching theme was the state’s responsibility to act against intimidation, both in person and online, especially since data analytics suggest that targeted, online abuse often originates from a small number of people. One participant said: “The State has the responsibility; this is happening in the background organised by a few people that are protected and enabled.”

Activists felt that, on a personal level, many people normalise the abuse and harassment, or try to laugh it off.

For example, it was reported that many migrants do not even recognise that they have been victims of hate crime because their experience of it is so prevalent. While ignoring or minimising the intimidation can be a coping mechanism, participants said it was cathartic to discuss it, and to discuss the levels of trauma that people have experienced as a result.

A major issue is the lack of a legal recourse to address this intimidation, particularly due to the stated passivity of the PSNI in addressing the issues. There are particular concerns over how the PSNI will implement the enforcement of the Safe Access Zones legislation (which will create ‘buffer’ zones around abortion clinics to protect users and staff). Other legal avenues were discussed as being inaccessible. For example, pursuing claims of defamation for activists is difficult because perpetrators will deliberately contact all the local defamation attorneys for advice first to create a conflict of interest.

Increasing the capacity of organisations to analyse data related to intimidation was seen as one potential avenue that could help address the problem, as well as mapping the far right, and increasing social media training. Overall, however, there was an acknowledgement that online abusers are very well organised, well-funded, and, for many issues, politically protected.

In order to successfully combat this intimidation, a much stronger state response is necessary, and this is unlikely to happen without concerted and organised effort from civil society. While we are far away from the promised rights and freedoms of the Good Friday Agreement, we must remember that this level of intimidation and harassment is also a sign that we are starting to make an impact.

Perpetrators of abuse and harassment want us to be divided and to only work on our sole issues of focus. We must remember that we are stronger together, that no activist in the Coalition is on their own, and that it is only through working collaboratively that we will generate enough fire and heat with our anger and advocacy to fully melt the chill of intimidation.

To learn more about the Equality Coalition, which is co-convened by CAJ and UNISON, please visit www.equalitycoalition.net.



Not talking about the constitutional question

Professor Colin Harvey

It is not easy to write about the impact of a campaign of harassment when you are its target. Staying within the safety of doctrinal constitutional and human rights law has merit and attractions. Not upsetting powerful people in a small place is tempting. Subject position and personal experience can be repressed, even if they emerge in unintended ways. My story matters only for the lessons that might be learned for the assistance of others. It is neither novel nor unique. I remain in a position of considerable privilege, still employed as a university professor.

My intention is to explore what has happened to me and what this tells us about the society we live in, conscious of the significance of the inclusion of the 'us' and the 'we' in that sentence, and the contested space of 'what has happened'. Part of the challenge of writing into this space is the denial and trivialisation of lived experience, which in itself is a familiar tactic of those who wish to push back against accountability. You are told that things you witnessed and experienced either never took place or are not serious. Simple acknowledgement retains a mighty power in a context where you begin to doubt yourself.

My recent experience began after the Brexit referendum. I grew up in Derry through the 1970s and 80s and have been active in public life throughout my academic career. I know what this place is like. I view public engagement as central to my work and have maintained good links with civil society organisations and public bodies over many years. It is hard to do human rights without wanting to change the world.

The Bill of Rights process provided insights on how fraught the debates can become, as principles, politics, power, and personalities became intermeshed. As a former Head of the Law School at Queen's University Belfast, I experienced much that was instructive about this region. None of that was adequate preparation for venturing into discussions of the constitutional future on the basis of the right to self-determination, as is set out in the Good Friday agreement (GFA). In theory that should be unproblematic, the agreement says there is a right to seek constitutional change. Everyone has heard of the 'principle of consent' and knows that constitutional status rests on democratic choice. All of which is agreed, endorsed, and guaranteed legally. A mundane conversation; no problem, right? Not quite.

Living the promises of the peace process can land you in trouble. An intense and hostile climate was engineered at a time when noises were being made about the status of ceasefires. Much of this is publicly well known, including the professional consequences, old news in fact. One of the least pleasant tasks has been to document it, with a view to promoting understanding. It is difficult to believe this level of professional/personal targeting arose spontaneously, and I suspect the past gives us the necessary clues.



The obsessive focus on Queen's is remarkable and disturbing, which included repeated and direct engagement with my employer and mobilisation around my academic role, including contributions from an anonymous 'Concerned QUB students' social media account. Separately, a seminar I had given was selectively clipped and widely shared, resulting in a storm of vitriol and hate. There are many other examples. So much more than mere 'Twitter trolls'.

The tactic seems fairly obvious. Although personally felt and experienced, the toxic politics is plainly not personal. The aim is to close down public dialogue and discourage others with an expressed constitutional preference from entering this conversation in the open. It is tailored to deter. Those responsible know what they are doing, understand how to shape public debate and grasp how to bend the work of public institutions to their will. The wall of social media bile sits there online, and the security implications are experienced by many here.

Other impacts are often less tangible. Discovering I was not an 'expert' in constitutional law after working in the area for nearly thirty years was a revelation. Playing along with the agenda is to risk being complicit, but I understand why people do - 'They will get you back' was uttered more than once ('they' meaning political unionism and loyalism). I recognise the internal compromises that many here make to seek approval, gain societal acceptance, and secure advancement. You wonder what that does to people. Conforming to fit in is nothing new, but the scale of it in a society that remains saturated by the symbolism of one community should give rights and equality activists serious pause for reflection.

However, it is the quiet words of encouragement and solidarity from others that has been the most heartbreaking part of this whole ordeal, as they are often linked to devastating personal and private tales of exclusion and discrimination.

The decisions I have taken are conscious and thought through. I do not expect anyone to agree with the choices I have made or what I have done. More than once the suggestion of diplomatic silence or a timeout was made, sometimes not arising from the opposition, but from hard-earned activist wisdom about strategy, tactics, and basic wellbeing. Watching how people navigate the North/NI is itself a lesson in what bullying, fear and threat achieve.

What am I learning? I am not entirely sure, but I do know this: For anyone struggling for positive change in any area, history is your constant friend. Why? Because the story it tells here, there, everywhere, again and again, is that 'divisive figures' create new and better worlds. A narrative of eventual vindication. Not always and never completely, but there is enough encouragement there to keep you going. I

will continue to talk about how to answer the constitutional question well and I hope you will too.

Professor Colin Harvey is Director of the Human Rights Centre at Queen's University Belfast. These reflections are written in a personal capacity.

Islamophobia in Northern Ireland: A growing concern

Naomi Green, North West Migrant's Forum

The Runnymede Trust first coined the term 'Islamophobia' in 1997, defining it as a way of referring to hatred or dislike of all or most Muslims. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims in the United Kingdom further defined it as "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". While there is an ongoing debate on these definitions with some critics arguing that the term is used to stifle legitimate criticism of Islam, this definition was widely welcomed by Muslim organisations and activists as an important step towards recognizing and combating anti-Muslim sentiment in society. It is important to recognize the harmful impact of Islamophobic attitudes and behaviours on individuals and communities.

According to the 2021 Census, 10,870 individuals in NI identify as Muslim. This marks a significant demographic shift with an increase in the population of almost two-thirds in 10 years. The actual population is likely to be higher as not all identified their religion in the census. Despite this increase, Muslims make up only 0.6% of the population of Northern Ireland. Although the number of Muslims in Northern Ireland is relatively small, Islamophobia is a real and growing concern in Northern Ireland. In recent years, there have been numerous reports of Islamophobic and racist incidents in the region. The most extreme examples include physical assault, intimidation, arson, and even shots fired at a car.

The arson attacks on Belfast Multi-Cultural Centre in January 2021 and April 2022 came on the back of many years of threats and acts of intimidation, which were clearly anti-Muslim in nature. This is just one example of the growing problem of Islamophobia in Northern Ireland. These incidents not only harm individuals but also undermine the social fabric of the community as a whole. The fact that no one has been prosecuted for either attack is not insignificant.

The intersection of multiple marginalised identities, such as ethnicity and religion, can make the experience of hate crimes more complex, as the victim may face multiple forms of discrimination. For example, Muslims who are also from minoritised ethnic communities, who are women, or who have insecure residential status (e.g. people seeking Asylum) may face multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization. They may also face additional barriers in seeking justice, which can compound the impact of Islamophobia on their lives.

Recent [research](#) commissioned by Belfast City Council into inequalities faced by minoritised residents of Belfast has suggested that Muslims and people of African heritage are more likely to face discrimination or hate crimes. My own research, which included a survey of 200 Muslims in NI, revealed that over half of the respondents had experienced a hate crime in the last five years, with women and those who described themselves as 'visibly Muslim' being more likely to be targeted. Furthermore, my research has highlighted that individuals are significantly less likely to report hate incidents to police than any other crime. The reasons for this are varied, but concerns that nothing will be done and fear of retaliation are key concerns. There is also the additional issue of paramilitaries, who can further complicate the situation by creating a climate of fear and exacerbating existing tensions in communities.

Hate crimes can leave victims feeling vulnerable and isolated, with long-lasting impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, the absence of effective legal protections can exacerbate feelings of injustice and mistrust in the criminal justice system. The lack of adequate hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland and the low rates of conviction has had a significant impact on not only those directly targeted for their Muslim identity, but the wider community, who lose trust.

The police, Public Prosecution Service (PPS), and Department of Justice (DOJ) must take the issue of Islamophobia seriously and work to build trust with communities that are disproportionately affected. This includes acknowledging and addressing the intersectional nature of discrimination. It is essential that Northern Ireland has stand-alone hate crime legislation that addresses the needs of all victims, including those targeted for their religion or ethnicity. The current process of drafting hate crime legislation provides an opportunity to strengthen protections and ensure that victims receive justice and the support they need. But the lack of an NI assembly and political will means it will be some time before this is realised.

In addition to the lack of legal protections, tackling the issues requires combating Islamophobic attitudes and behaviours at all levels, including through education, awareness-raising, and legal frameworks that protect the rights of all members of society. Moreover, political leaders have a responsibility to condemn hate crimes and provide greater support for victims, even when incidents occur within 'their own' communities. Ultimately, it is only by working together that we can build a society that is truly inclusive, diverse, and tolerant.

The effect of paramilitaries on women in Northern Ireland

Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist, WRDA

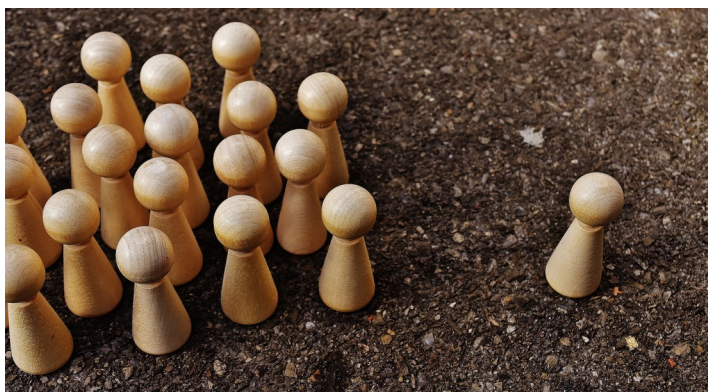
Paramilitarism is a reality in Northern Ireland and continues to persist a quarter of a century after the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Paramilitary organisations continue to exist, despite, in most cases, ceasefires being in place and the conflict, as it's traditionally understood, being behind us. Furthermore, many of those who are involved in paramilitary activity are not the same actors who were involved during the conflict and the activities that continue to come under the umbrella name of 'paramilitary activity' are not the same as those carried out during the conflict.

In the public imagination and parts of the media, we tend to see paramilitaries portrayed as young males with outspoken and stringent political views, primarily harming other young males from the opposing camp. The reality is much more complex. Paramilitary organisations as they exist today tend to be most extensively involved in controlling 'their own' area, and 'their own' people, often for financial gain. This means that many within these areas experience them as oppressive and controlling criminal gangs, rather than anything loftier – whatever their claims to the contrary.

Paramilitaries are known to be involved in loan sharking and this particularly impacts upon those with limited incomes, especially women, as shown in [research](#) carried out in 2020 by the Women's Regional Consortium. These activities increase their control over vulnerable communities while also demonstrating their malign influence. Paramilitaries rely on the reality that women are more likely to rely on social security than men, and more likely to be in debt than men are - they have been shown to target people who use food banks, which, again, disproportionately impacts women.

Race hate crime in Northern Ireland is often linked to paramilitarism. In communities which have endured and suffered under paramilitary community control for decades, paramilitaries are incentivised to target perceived 'newcomer' communities, on the pretext of racism and xenophobia, to justify their grip and coercive control over the community as a whole. In addition, researcher Coumilah Manjoo argues that paramilitary coercive control is a form of Honour Based Abuse (HBA).

Recent [research](#) by the Independent Reporting Commission confirms that paramilitary activity remains an issue in Northern Ireland and lament that civil society has apparently learned to live with it. The Commissioners,



who include Monica McWilliams, describe the situation as one of 'coercive control' of entire communities. In addition, paramilitary affiliation, or alleged affiliation, is used to enact coercive control within domestic relationships and after they end. More robust action against these organisations would free up money to be invested in the communities that are currently being harmed by this coercive control, many of which have some of the worst levels of deprivation in the UK and Europe.

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) has conducted several pieces of primary research into the experiences of women with a range of issues relating to gender inequality and violence against women and girls, including the Feminist Recovery Plan [primary research project](#); the Protection from Stalking Bill [primary research project](#); and the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) [primary research project](#).

In total, the WPG has engaged with over 1200 women in Northern Ireland through this research. Although we did not directly ask women about their experiences with paramilitarism in this research, women repeatedly raised issues relating to paramilitarism and anonymously provided us with personal stories, which are available in the above reports.

Research shows that paramilitary membership or connections continue to be a major factor in intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and domestic abuse cases, with victims afraid to report to the police because of fear of repercussions – not just from the perpetrator, but from their associates. Stories shared with the WPG in research efforts include instances of perpetrators having messages sent to survivors by fellow paramilitaries, being "put out" of their home and community, and worse:

"...Friend was held at knife point for two days by a group of three men who brutalised her body, tortured her with cigarette burns and hundreds of knife cuts and repeatedly raped her because she was lesbian. The men were paramilitary and lived on her street. She never reported it because the police and paramilitaries were on the same side. Her family left Belfast."

Compounding all this is a fear of speaking out for fear of repercussions. Advocating for gender equality in Northern Ireland often requires those working in the women's sector to have public-facing roles. The systemic and institutionalised misogyny in society means that women in public-facing roles are particularly vulnerable to abuse and harassment as a result of their work.

Members of the Women's Policy Group (WPG) and colleagues in the wider women's sector regularly face intimidation, online abuse, and defamation following public appearances, particularly if they discuss

paramilitarism in our society. For example, after giving oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in July 2021, women's sector colleagues received threats and a significant amount of online abuse after discussing the impact of paramilitarism on women in Northern Ireland.

It is no exaggeration to say that paramilitary influence operates like coercive control. This kind of control can be difficult to break and feel almost inescapable, but it is possible, and we will continue to work to that end.

Anonymous account from a Unionist feminist who has experienced the 'chill factor' from within her own community

As I write this article for Just News, and reflecting on the topic itself as a woman born and reared in the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community, to even have to focus on this seems unfair and unjust but unfortunately that is what life is like here in Northern Ireland. Growing up, women were never forefront and centre of where I lived other than rearing the kids or working part time in menial jobs, but the men from where I lived were 'involved' in a number of organisations and it was very much a man's world within that community, what they said went. They decided how to deal with community issues and where a woman's place was, mostly for them in the home.

The idea that a woman could think for herself or do things for herself was untoward so when I grew up, educated myself, and found my voice, that did not sit well within the Loyalist Unionist Community. Yes, if you were part of a church or the faith system, then you had more of a voice, a middle class one all the same, but a voice. Working class areas, not a chance.

Unfortunately, this patriarchal system followed me into my work, as a woman working across Northern Ireland. Developing my own set of skills and developing my knowledge and, in particular, working on community relations a 'dirty word' in PUL areas was unheard of. Many times it was said I "worked for the other sort". Sometimes the comments were even worse, but I know any woman from the same background has had the same issues, sometimes face to face, but more so online. I am aware that many of our Unionist female politicians are in exactly the same position so this is across the board.

There seems to be a desire to "silence" the voice of PUL women, a bit like the three monkeys, 'Hear No Evil', 'See No Evil', 'Speak No Evil'. Research in relation to how voiceless PUL women have become in recent years is stark. There is a fear of raising your head above the parapet and of daring to be something they think you should not be. Many of us are constant targets online - that seems to be the 'best' place to target women, with faceless people thinking they can say what they want without any accountability. And yet, there are still no firm laws and policing structures in place to deal with that sort of abuse, nor specific powers recognising that we all have a right to feel safe and secure, and not be under the watchful 'big brother' eye of Unionism or Loyalism.

Even when I speak, I worry it may be tweeted some hours later and I wonder what comments or spin might be put on what I've said. Some self-appointed or self-selecting people from within the community feel they have a right to 'keep us quiet', but I always remind myself that I work at a grassroots level and do more for communities than any of those people ever will. I earned my place at the table and, like any other woman from the PUL community, I will take my place at that table, whether they like it or not.

Thankfully, I do have some good examples of engagement with Unionist Loyalist Women from some organisations I have worked with in the past so it is not all doom and gloom. However, these good practice examples of giving Unionist women a voice must be supported and showcased. People must step forward to say we support our Unionist sisters no matter who they are and no longer refer to them as a "lundy" [traitor]. None of them should be watching over their shoulder, afraid for their own safety and safety of their home, their family, or even their job. We are human too and we have rights, people must remember that.

The intimidation faced by Irish language speakers and activists

'Keep Irish Out - Let Irish In'

*Conchúr Ó Muadaigh, Advocacy Manager,
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Daithí Mac Gabhann and his parents Mairtín and Seph have led the Donate4Daithí organ donation campaign in recent years. Their campaign to give 'the gift of life' was a very successful one as from 1 June 2023 the law around organ donation will change to an opt-out system. The new law will be known as 'Dáithí's Law' in recognition of the brave young man who has been on the waiting list for a heart transplant since 2018. Just this week, as I write this article on the intimidation faced by Irish speakers, I was informed by the family that they received a two page, hate filled, sectarian, handwritten letter to their home all because they're raising their son with Irish. It intended to intimidate the family and deter them from their work, but the Mac Gabhann family rightly rose above it and said: "Hate never wins!".

The Irish language community is riding on the crest of a wave. The British Government finally introduced the Language and Identity (Northern Ireland) Bill at Westminster three days after 20,000 people attended the biggest ever Irish language rally in May of last year; more than 7,000 pupils are enrolled in Irish medium education (IME) across the North; *An Cailín Ciúin*, an Irish language feature film, made history when it was nominated for an Oscar; the Irish language rap group Kneecap is currently amongst the most popular acts in the music scene; there is a sharp rise in demand for Irish language classes, with nearly 20 venues across Belfast offering adult classes in the language; and over 500 learners attend classes in East Belfast as part of Turas, a project established a decade ago to connect people from Protestant communities to their own history and the Irish language. In addition, census figures from 2021 show a 43% increase in those who use Irish as their main language and 17% growth in overall usage amongst the wider population. The household survey shows a higher percentage of young people with Irish in comparison to the older generation. This is a young, vibrant, and emerging community, not on the margins but very much part of the fabric of our society.

2023 marks the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). The Irish language featured strongly in the agreement, with several commitments made



under the theme of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity. It was promised that restrictions to the maintenance and development of the language would be removed. The agreement was to mark a new era in the relationship between the Northern State and the Irish language community. I would like to be telling you that the peace process was a catalyst for the growth of the Irish language but, unfortunately, that hasn't been the case. Instead, the language has faced continued denigration by public representatives, including government ministers; the withdrawal of funding from established schemes aimed at promoting fluency; and the dismissal of our demand for the delivery of promised language rights as a demand for 'preferential treatment'.

The Irish language has featured in all of the major peace agreements as a result of a long history of conflict. The 14th century Statutes of Kilkenny and the 17th and 18th Century Penal Laws were key moments in the cultural colonisation of Ireland. Such laws were a calculated attempt at cultural colonisation and they were, to a large extent, successful. Irish speakers were marginalised and excluded from public life, and were banned and prosecuted for using, educating, and living through their native tongue. Despite these repressive measures, more than half the population remained Irish-speaking according to the census of 1841. However, the Great Hunger 1845-51 and its aftermath substantially weakened Irish-speaking Ireland through death and emigration. The teaching of the Irish language and, indeed, use of the language was forbidden in the National School system established in the 1830s.

The irony in all of this is that the British Government, who have been responsible for centuries of deliberate policies to systematically suppress the language, have

now legislated for the Language and Identity (Northern Ireland) Bill to protect and enhance the language. That they have done so as a result of decades of tireless campaigning by Irish language activists.

Despite the significant progress made in recent years and the Language and Identity (Northern Ireland) Bill becoming law in December 2022, Irish speakers in the North of Ireland continue to experience marginalisation and exclusion. Political opposition to the language isn't from political parties on the margins; it comes from some of the highest political office-holders. Until recently the DUP, as the largest party in the North, consistently opposed and frustrated progress on Irish language matters. In more recent times, it (unsuccessfully) attempted to prevent the Language and Identity (Northern Ireland) Bill from progressing in Westminster.

Opposition to the language is often rooted in sectarianism and such hostile opposition has had a major impact on Irish speakers and activists. The DUP has withdrawn funds, introduced English-language only policies, blocked bilingual signage, frustrated the North-South political structures on language matters, and continues to threaten to rollback legislation that promotes and encourages Irish medium education. All of this is consistent with how the state has treated the language over the 100 years of its existence.

The most concerning element of political Unionism's constant public vilification and ridiculing of the language is that it has created an unprecedented climate of hostility, encouraging direct intimidation of Irish speakers and activists. This was evidenced recently when a threatening sign was erected outside a County Down primary school warning it to 'Keep Irish Out'. [IME research](#) has concluded that Irish-medium schools have faced "ill-disguised sectarianism and anti-Irish bias" from education authorities.

Bilingual signs have been vandalised over 300 times in the past five years with a third of those signs destroyed in the past year alone. An East Belfast Irish language pre-school, Naiscoil na Seolta, was forced to relocate due to threats, while language activist Linda Ervine, who was behind the development of the pre-school, has been the victim of a social media hate campaign. Linda often talks of the veiled threats against her and the organisation Turas that she leads. Dream Dearg activists who have campaigned for language rights have been targeted on sectarian posters and face constant harassment and sectarian abuse on social media. TG4's children's programming block, Cúla4, has had adverts across Belfast destroyed or defaced. Graffiti was



dubbed on posters with sectarian slogans, including 'KAT', an acronym for 'Kill all Taigs'. A virulent and nasty campaign of opposition to the Irish language from political parties including the DUP and TUV and their appointed government ministers has encouraged and facilitated this climate of hostility and intimidation.

25 years on from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, it's evident that much more needs to be done before we can truthfully say that the promise of that agreement (and, indeed, subsequent agreements) has been realised. Discrimination against the Irish language community did not end with the signing of our peace agreement. Colonial legacies were not wiped clean by the signatures of politicians and heads of state on an international agreement.

Despite the obstacles outlined above and despite the climate of hostility, threats and intimidation, the Irish-language community is growing in terms of its size, its confidence, and its determination to achieve justice. This proud and resilient community has never sought permission to ascertain its rights and demands and nor has it held back from mounting effective political opposition. Together we will continue to grow and build this community, we will continue to insist that agreements are fully honoured and that international and domestic laws are adhered to, thereby providing the solid foundation to effectively challenge hostility, sectarianism, and marginalisation.

Conradh na Gaeilge (CnaG) has worked with CAJ on a number of joint reports on issues related to the Irish language. You can access these all of these publications here: www.caj.org.uk/publications/?sft_keyword=minoritised-language-rights.

Civil Liberties Diary - March 2023

Compiled by Cara Magennis from various sources



Wednesday 8 March 2023: The Independent Reporting Commission has suggested appointing an independent facilitator to mediate and play the role of a 'halfway house' to engage with paramilitaries to encourage disbandment. Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris said that this was a welcomed recommendation.

Friday 10 March 2023: The Council of Europe (CoE) has said that the UK government's amendments to its controversial legacy bill for Northern Ireland have failed to allay concerns that the bill is not compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). CoE commented that it was "crucial" that the Legacy Bill was "in full compliance with the European Convention [on human rights] and will enable effective investigations into all outstanding cases".

Tuesday 14 March 2023: US president Joe Biden has confirmed that he will be visiting Northern Ireland across a five-day presidential visit to Ireland to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The President will fly into Belfast and then travel to both Dublin and Mayo.

Tuesday 14 March 2023: Across the Isle of Ireland, the introduction of the UK Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) scheme will have devastating effects on tourism, according to the tourism sector. Titanic Belfast has argued that the scheme, which will require certain travellers to get pre-travel authorisation before crossing the border, will have a catastrophic effect on tourism within Northern Ireland.

Tuesday 14 March 2023: The army and police has been accused of

covering up deaths of children that occurred due to the use of rubber and plastic bullets during the troubles. BBC Spotlight has examined declassified material that shows the Army knew it was too dangerous to fire the bullets at children, but did so anyway. It has also been documented that the Royal Ulster Constabulary was firing plastic bullets that were never approved for use against people.

Tuesday 14 March 2023: The Northern Ireland unemployment rate (currently 2.4%) has fallen back to pre-pandemic level. The rate of economic inactivity (people who are not in work nor seeking work) has also reduced to 26.4%, though this is still higher than the UK average (21.3%).

Saturday 18 March 2023: Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has praised the work of women within the peace process in Northern Ireland as being 'critical' during a talk regarding the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, given at an event in Georgetown University in Washington DC.

Sunday 19 March 2023: US President Joe Biden has stated that he is a strong supporter of the new trade deal (the Windsor Framework) for Northern Ireland following Brexit. Biden signalled his support while meeting the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar at the White House. The visit comes weeks after the new agreement was drawn up by the UK and EU.

Monday 20 March 2023: The UK government has stressed that it does not plan to amend or renegotiate the Windsor Framework despite the DUP insisting that it would vote against the new post-Brexit trade deal within parliament.

Monday 20 March 2023: The NSPCC has called on political parties to support a ban on the physical punishment of children in Northern Ireland, which would bring NI into line with Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland. This call to action comes one year after Wales made any type of physical punishment, including smacking and slapping, illegal.

Monday 20 March 2023: DUP leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, has said that DUP candidate Tyler Hoey should be given a second chance despite liking tweets that supported the 1993 Greysteel Massacre. In his social media posts, Mr Hoey has also referenced the UDA, criticised lockdown, and seems to have 'joked' about the death of 39 migrants in a lorry in 2019.

Tuesday 21 March 2023: The first census of sexual orientation within Northern Ireland has found that 2.1% of the population identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Comparatively, in Wales the figure was 3% and in England it was 3.2%. Younger people in NI were found to be more inclined to identify as LGBTQ+ , with 4.6% of 16-24 year olds identifying as being a part of the this community.

Tuesday 28 March 2023: Former Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams has said he now fully appreciates how brave Lord Trimble was in supporting the Good Friday Agreement. Mr Adams was speaking to the BBC ahead of the agreement's 25th anniversary in April.