

Keynote speech given by Susan McKay at Trauma Recovery Network conference on 13th October 2010.

I'll start by reading you a short extract from a book I wrote in 1998. This is about a woman living in one of the toughest estates in North Belfast. It doesn't matter which side she came from – it could be either:

“Gwen grew up during the worst of the troubles. She remembered boys making petrol bombs in the living room, vigilantes in huts on the street corners, being evacuated to the church hall, someone up the street getting shot. When she was still a child, her parents were killed in a car crash. Her oldest sister, who was seventeen, took over caring for the family. Two years later, Gwen found her sister unconscious in her bed one morning. She died later that day from a mix of alcohol and pills. Gwen and her siblings were left to fend for themselves, until people noticed that they couldn't. Then they were fostered out to various relations, some of whom were kind, while others were cruel or alcoholic or both.

“When I was sixteen, I got married to a pig who murdered me. I had just left school. He knocked my tooth out and broke another one, sunk his teeth in my leg, trailed me round the living room, wrecked the place. I had no money, no coal, no food. The wee kitchen house we had was condemned. I had a little boy and he saw all the hammerings I was getting and it was disturbing him. That man was a head-the-ball. One time he brought home a butchers knife from his work. I used to just curl up in a ball. He went with other girls too and used to come home with lovebites. I'd leave and then he'd come crying crocodile tears and I'd go back. I was in hospital twice. I was an orphan with no older brothers. I didn't have anyone who could sort of scare him.”

Her husband's mother used to come around after he had smashed the house up. "She blamed me. She'd say, "My son is not used to living in a mess like this." It was easy to see why – her sons are all wife-beaters and her daughters are trollops,' Gwen Said. The picture she painted was of a macho society where male violence was a defining characteristic. Domestic violence was rife, and if a woman could not call upon a more powerful man to curb her husband, she had to put up with it. Female solidarity could not be assumed, and interventions by social services were intermittent and inept."

In the context of the Northern Irish Troubles, and in post conflict Northern Ireland, the silencing of victims of rape and domestic violence was and is, a crime of political violence. The denial of access to justice for such victims was and is a denial of human rights. These are issues for feminists, and issues which feminists are, I am proud to day, addressing.

I am a Northerner, from Derry, who moved to the Republic in the mid 1970's, escaping the Troubles, like so many of my generation. I discovered, however, that leaving the conflict behind wasn't as simple as all that, and I returned in 1981, determined to forge my own identity, needing to find my place.

Belfast was a harsh and macho place in the early 1980's. I found it impossible to live in the middle of political conflict without finding a way to be political. For me it was in feminist activism. I was one of a group of feminists who set up the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre in 1982. I had previously trained and worked as a volunteer in the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre.

We quickly found that the violence of the political

conflict masked a horrific level of violence against women and children. This was not recognised as a violence which had its own politics. Nor was it regarded as a significant feature of Northern Ireland. Before Women's Aid set up its first refuge in the 1970's, domestic violence was not mentioned as a public issue. Before the RCC was set up, nor was rape.

I remember a headline from the Belfast Telegraph which was about the latest crime statistics: "Serious violence decreases, rape increases" it read.

But most rape never got near the crime statistics. That's because it wasn't reported to the police.

Journalists would sometimes come to us wanting victims to tell their stories, and sometimes they would specify the sort of story they wanted. Do you have a Catholic woman raped by a policeman, they'd ask. Do you have a Protestant woman raped by an IRA man?

Such stories did exist. Loyalist paramilitaries did, for example, rape Catholic women in a number of cases I am aware of. In my book, *Bear in Mind These Dead*, I describe the 1972 murder by loyalists of David McClenaghan, a child with a mental health disability, who was shot after being forced to witness the rape and near murder of his mother, Sally.

Sally's sister, Anne, told me that Sally had never recovered from the events of that night in her home in North Belfast. "She went off the rails," she said. "She'd change like water. She was adrift."

But there did not appear to be a systematic use of such violence against women on the enemy side. Instead, largely, rape and domestic violence were carried out by men whose victims were women from their own

communities, their own families. Men raped and beat their wives, their children, their neighbours, the girl they met at the local disco.

And some of those men had guns or were able to invoke the tacit support of men with guns. I spoke about this at a previous Trauma Recovery Network event last year. I said then, and I say again now, the women and children who were the victims of sexual and domestic violence at the hands of men who were soldiers or policemen or self styled freedom fighters are among the most silenced people in the history of this country.

The sordid, misogynist truth is that this really was was the armed patriarchy. There were men with guns which they held supposedly to defend their people or to liberate their people, and they used those guns to intimidate, overpower and silence women and children who knew them, loved them, trusted them, or relied on them. I am talking about policemen, soldiers, republicans and loyalists.

There were of course also men who were not directly involved in the conflict in this way, but who lived in communities in which reporting crime to the police was such a strong taboo that they knew they could rape and beat women and children with impunity.

Women did break ranks. Think of Aine Tyrell, bravely waiving her anonymity to challenge Sinn Fein. She endured a childhood ruined by incestuous rape while her father, Liam Adams, was feted as a Republican, on the run across the border because of his heroic role in the struggle – when she knew that the truth was he was on the run from justice because she had broken ranks and reported him to the police. He is still fighting extradition and the Republican movement while shamed, is still equivocating.

Think of Sorcha McKenna, who also bravely gave up her anonymity. Her father, Vincent, was a republican who changed sides to become the darling of unionism. He too claimed he was persecuted by the authorities and on the run from the IRA – in reality he was a fantasist and a child abuser. Unionist politicians who had lionised him were silent when his daughter exposed him.

The conflict is over – just about. But there has been no public acknowledgement of the role of gender based violence as part of its history. Northern Irish women with expertise on the issue were brought to Timor Leste and Liberia to share their experiences with women from those countries as part of the Irish government's so called Cross Learning Process on UN Resolution 1325. This resolution recognises the use of gender based violence during wars and conflicts and requires women to be given a role in peace processes. But while the UK has a National Action Plan on UN Resolution 1325 and Ireland is preparing one, NI is not included in either.

The British and Irish governments have, since the Good Friday Agreement, recognised that the border facilitates perpetrators of GBV to evade justice, and have made some efforts to deal with this political legacy.

On the 17th of November 2008, the Irish minister for justice met his Northern equivalent at Hillsborough Castle. They announced plans to progress the harmonisation of laws and systems in both jurisdictions to stop sex offenders from using the border to escape justice. Shared arrangements between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána were already proving, they said, very successful.

On the same day, newspapers north and south of the

border carried photographs of a man called Ernest Finlay, along with warnings to the public that he was extremely dangerous, and at large. A serial rapist, Finlay had been released from jail in the north where he was being 'risk managed' in his home area of Tyrone – and had fled across the border, where no such arrangements were in place, and had gone on the run.

A similarly embarrassing coincidence had overshadowed the signing of a Memo of Understanding on the cross border sharing of information on sex offenders in 2006. Weeks earlier, sex offender Paul Redpath had broken the rules of his probation in the North, and disappeared. If captured in the North, he could have been returned to prison for 5 years.

Instead, he was traced to the Republic, where, the authorities decided, the crime of breaching a probation order was insufficient to warrant extradition. So he was simply asked to sign on the sex offenders register. Child welfare organisations were appalled, warning that dangerously weak Irish laws could result in high risk sex offenders regarding Ireland as a safe haven.

Other infamous sex offenders who have used the border to evade justice include, of course, Father Brendan Smyth, whose Abbot in Co Cavan ignored RUC requests for his extradition and facilitated decades of abuse of dozens of children, and Robert Howard, who is now serving a life sentence for the murder of a young girl in the south of England. He is believed to have murdered Tyrone girl Arlene Arkinson and to have dumped her body somewhere in the lonely mountain area between Donegal and Tyrone. Howard repeatedly used the border to disappear after committing crimes of extreme violence against women and girls. At one stage he lived in a van literally just across the border from the town where he had raped a teenager.

Captured offenders have been able to pick and choose where to be tried and where to serve their sentences. Billy Adams was sentenced to 12 years in Dublin for the rape of a Northern girl in the Republic – he chose to serve his sentence in the North and availed of 50% remission. have had the right to opt for trial on either side of the border. Stephen Cahoon, whose history of brutality against women was interrupted only by a series of short prison sentences, strangled Jean Quigley in Derry in 2008 and headed across the border to Donegal. He was extradited to the North but opted to be tried in the Republic.

All of these cases are notorious – but the women who run domestic and sexual violence services know that there are hundreds of men who have similarly used the border and the existence of two sets of legislation and two incompatible systems to brutalise women and escape justice. There are well known ‘safe houses’ in Donegal where domestic tyrants from Derry lie low while continuing to intimidate their victims.

Sexual offenders, rapists and men who beat up their wives and children allow their victims no rights – but they typically know and insist upon their own. They know where the law is more favourable at a given time, where remission is better, which sex offenders register has more stringent conditions, how to manipulate barring orders, access orders, and probation conditions North and South.

These are political issues. Thankfully, by now, feminists are in a position to develop imaginative ways of tackling them. In Derry, Foyle Women’s Aid has pioneered excellent inter-agency practise involving the police, social services and Women’s Aid in support of victims of GBV. This work was bravely begun before it was politically acceptable in loyalist and republican

communities.

Foyle Women's Aid has also worked with the PSNI to develop training programmes which also involve Gardai across the border in Donegal. Best practise on both sides of the border is being promoted. There is excellent co-operation by the authorities, and an increase in reporting of domestic violence in particular has been noted.

I'm proud to say that the National Women's Council has got involved in this groundbreaking work. Early this year we held a members meeting in Galway on the issue of cross border initiatives on VAW and out of that has come an ambitious project involving feminist advocacy and service providers in the North West border region, in partnership with the National Women's Council. We will work with academics with a long track record on these issues, notably Professor Monica McWilliams, soon to leave the NIHRC. We are currently working with Inez McCormack on UN Resolution 1325. We will be holding a seminar involving experts from North and South among others in early December to develop strategies.

The work that the TRN is now doing in this area, including holding this important meeting today and offering support to the idea of an all island SAVI type report, is also heartening, and I commend you for it.

I'll finish where I started: In the context of the Northern Irish Troubles, and in post conflict Northern Ireland, the silencing of victims of rape and domestic violence was and is, a crime of political violence. The denial of access to justice for such victims was and is a denial of human rights. This is part of an unacknowledged legacy of the Troubles, and it must be brought into the open at last.

