

# **‘When you know what they are capable of’: Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control**

*Research Report 2024*



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**Women's Aid**  
FOYLE

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Huge gratitude is extended to the women who chose to share their experiences. The courage and resilience of each woman is evident in each story and in how they dealt with and moved on from incredibly difficult and unsafe situations. It is because of them that learning is offered through this research to advance understanding and response to women affected by these kinds of harms.

Thanks to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund for funding and ongoing support to undertake this research.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

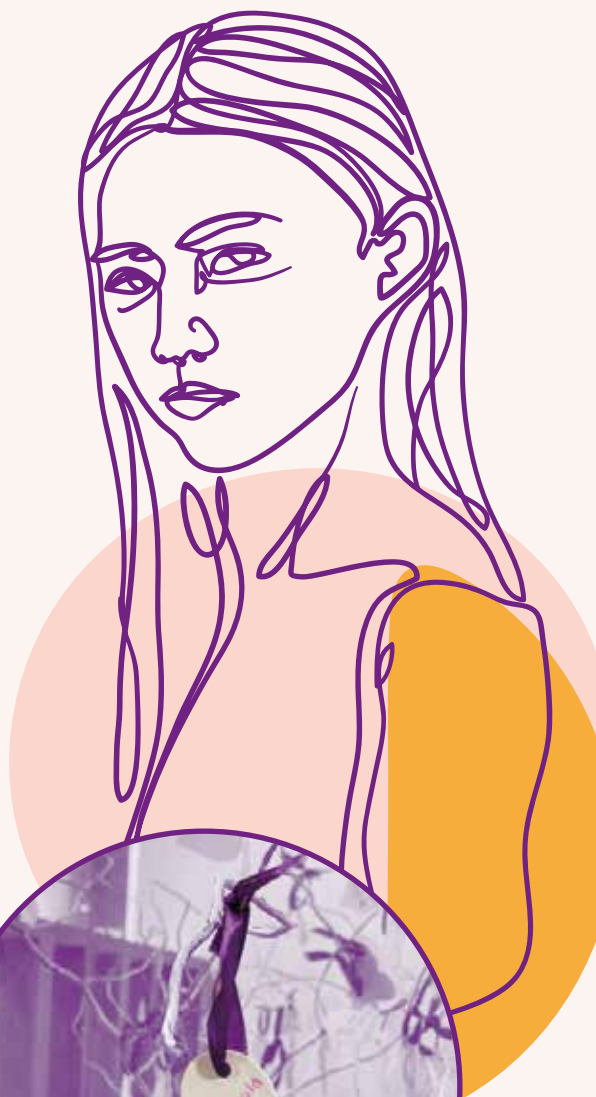
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## ACRONYMS

<b>CRVAW</b>	Conflict-Related Violence Against Women
<b>IPV</b>	Intimate Partner Violence
<b>IRC</b>	Independent Reporting Commission
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based Violence
<b>PSNI</b>	Police Service of Northern Ireland
<b>VAW</b>	Violence Against Women



*The photo on the front cover is one of many messages of hope written by students of Thornhill College during a campaign run by students to support the work of Foyle Women's Aid.*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This research aims to deepen understanding of women's experiences of contemporary paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. It evidences the coercive net in which some women live their lives – how paramilitary-influenced coercion colours their intimate, familial and community relationships, as well as their ability to seek help, and their experience of services when they do.

The research presents a new 'Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control'. Drawing from interviews with victim-survivors whose experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) were in some way affected by paramilitarism, as well as political, community and service sector workers, the framework evidences the relationship between coercive control in women's relationships and wider community-based paramilitary social controls.

Coercive control was originally developed in the context of IPV to describe *patterns of insidious harms and behaviours* that build slowly towards the full coercion and control by a partner over a woman's personhood, life and habits.<sup>1</sup> Coercive control relies on an 'or else' manipulative ploy, whereby coercive tactics establish a belief on the part of the target of control, that there will be a negative

outcome if they do not comply favourably with a demand.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, political and policy approaches in Northern Ireland have come to question whether 'coercive control' would be an appropriate frame for understanding paramilitary activities that include, inter alia, 'punishment' attacks; forced drug dealing and debt controls; commercial exploitation and extortion and grooming for the purposes of sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>3</sup> These are significant harms, which collectively signal an organised and controlling force at community levels.

However, applying coercive control beyond IPV and instead to the dynamics of paramilitary (non-state actor) authority and control, or to how paramilitarism is sustained in the current era, is, arguably, in nascent stages of full understanding and response, both in Northern Ireland and beyond.

This report advances the idea 'conflict-related coercive control' and adapts the concept of coercive control to examining how women's experiences of IPV are influenced by paramilitarism.



# FRAMEWORK OF PARAMILITARY-RELATED COERCIVE CONTROL

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The 'Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control' uses the idea of 'coercive power'<sup>4</sup> to adapt coercive control outside of IPV and *instead to paramilitarism*.

The framework **initially establishes the Socio-Ecological Coercive Context** that enables paramilitary-related controls. These include the (i) 'Historic and Contemporary Socio-Political Context' where paramilitary conventions have established the basis for group-based '*or else*' coercive power over communities; (ii) Gender Inequalities and Gendered Violence that sustain heterosexist inequalities and unequal sexual rights that are exploited by men to control women; and (iii) the historic Silencing of Gendered Violence Related to the Troubles, which means that conflict and paramilitary-related gendered violence has not been disrupted by formal recognition or accountability. Figure 1 in the report illustrates the social context that enables coercive control (see page 15).

The framework **then maps the components involved in paramilitary-related gendered coercive control** (Figure 2 in the report illustrates the framework, page 19). The components include:

**Stage-Setting:** As the initial phase of coercive control, the coercer uses stage setting to make it clear to the target that the conditions are in place to make a threat a reality.<sup>5</sup> This research identified that paramilitary-related stage-setting occurs in two ways: first, through paramilitary conventions that establish authority for paramilitary control at broader community levels (on a group basis); and second, by a woman's partner, who draws the broader paramilitary stage-setting into their relationship (individual-to-group basis).

**Vulnerability To Coercion:** The intersecting social, psychological, economic and political background, and wider life experiences of women all play a role in susceptibility to coercion.<sup>6</sup> Paramilitaries also exploit poverty and motherhood status, to prey on women's vulnerabilities, including control of children.

**Demand, Threat and Harm: Mechanisms of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control:** Demands are accompanied by threats and are based on the *implicit and chronic presence of paramilitarisms at community levels*, as well as **demands and threats that make explicit and tactical use of paramilitarisms**. The latter includes the instrumental use of weapons, mock-ups of punishment shootings (see box<sup>7</sup>), deliberately implicating women in paramilitarism and gendered violence.

*'He took me up a back lane and told me to sit there, because he was going off to get this gun. Because he was going to shoot me in the legs. And the fear of that, like, I actually nearly wet myself, I was absolutely terrified. And all this was because I was wearing makeup.'*

**Surveillance:** Women's current and former partners used the material resources of paramilitarism for surveillance, such as changing of cars and using their networks to monitor her. Group-based tactics of surveillance create a much wider berth of surveillance than that typical of one partner in the context of IPV, creating layers of coercion and surveillance that women have to navigate.

### Response to Paramilitary-related

**Coercive Control:** Responses to coercive control by victims-survivors varies, including navigating their safety by living within fear and control, or leaving relationships. The research also found that services are compromised by fears that workers experience, as well as their inability to confront paramilitary tacit control of communities and services. In addition, victim-survivors feel, at times, targeted by some units of policing, who are more interested in their partners' paramilitarism, than in her safety (see box<sup>8</sup>).

### Impacts of Coercion and Control:

The impacts are manifold and include mental illness, stress and anxiety; drug and alcohol addiction; physical ill-health; psychological effects on children; suicide ideation; displacement from the home and isolation from community and family due to paramilitary tactics.

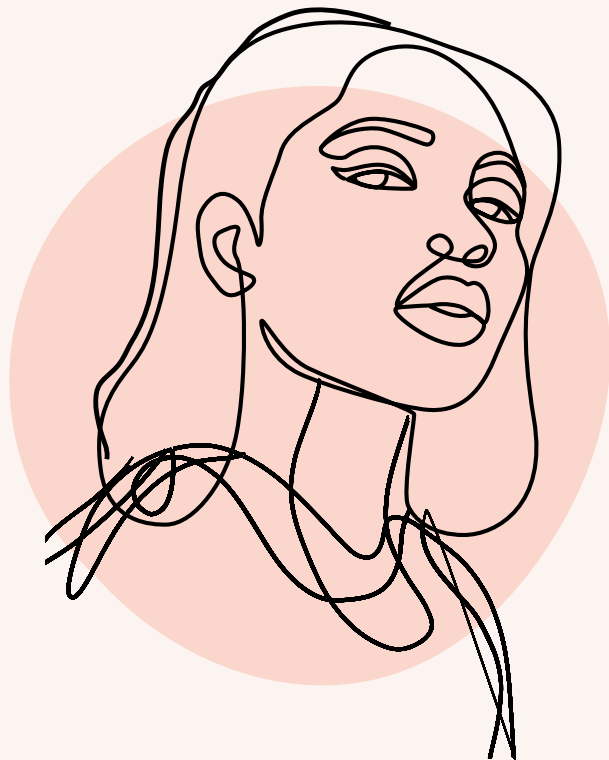
**Delivery of Threat and Harm:** Acute expressions of control were experienced by women as part of the 'delivery' of the threat for non-compliance with demands. It included rape, ostracization, threats, expulsions and displacement from their home and ostracization from their children.

### Conclusion

In all, the research identified that **paramilitarisms play a dualistic role** in (some) women's experiences of IPV. First, paramilitary conventions **hold an implicit presence and are tacitly used** as the basis for controls over a community, home or relationship. Second, **paramilitary conventions have an explicit**

*'I was kind of stuck in the middle, stuck between a rock and a hard place. I had the MI5 coming down telling me if I don't talk about this guy I'm going to prison and I'm going to lose my children. And then, I had the paramilitaries on the other side, you know, "you open your mouth and you are going in an early grave".'*

**presence and are used in a tactical way** within a community, home or relationship. The coercer, or the wider group, use paramilitary convention as a strategic instrument, to threaten, instil fear and ultimately exert control over a woman. The services sector is directly affected, as is its ability to respond appropriately to women's needs. It is evident that women affected by paramilitarisms live their lives within a **coercive net of implicit and explicit coercion and control** (illustrated more fully by Figure 3 in the body of the report, page 40).



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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A number of recommendations arise from the research:

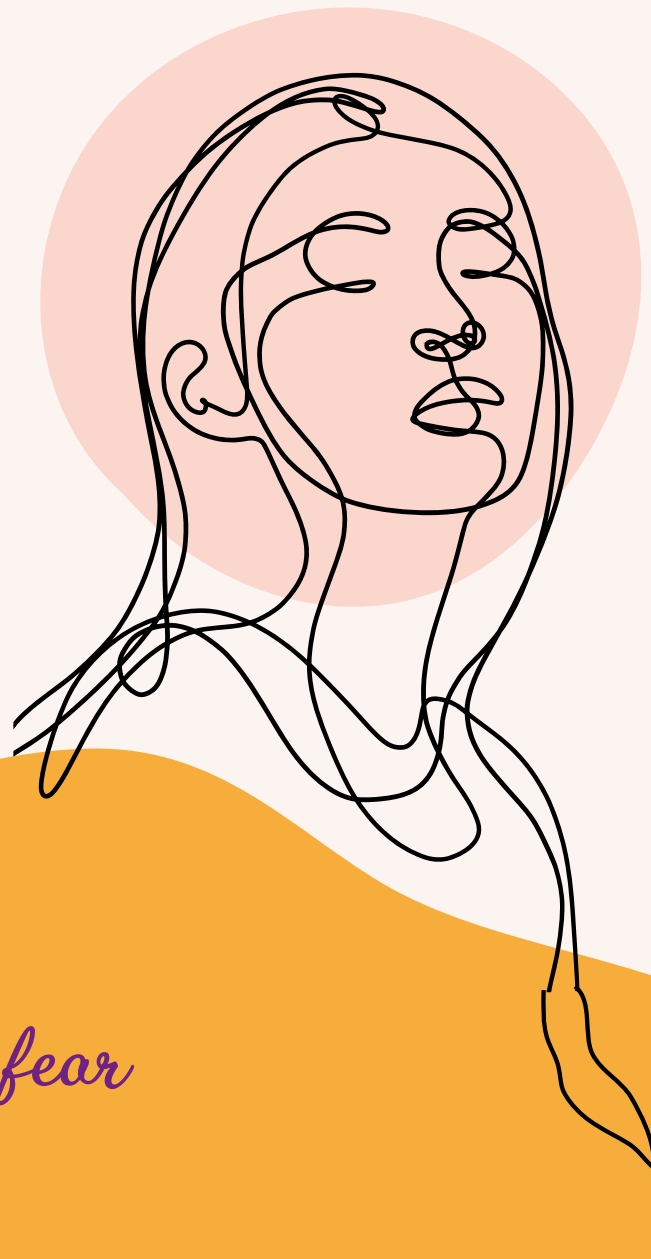
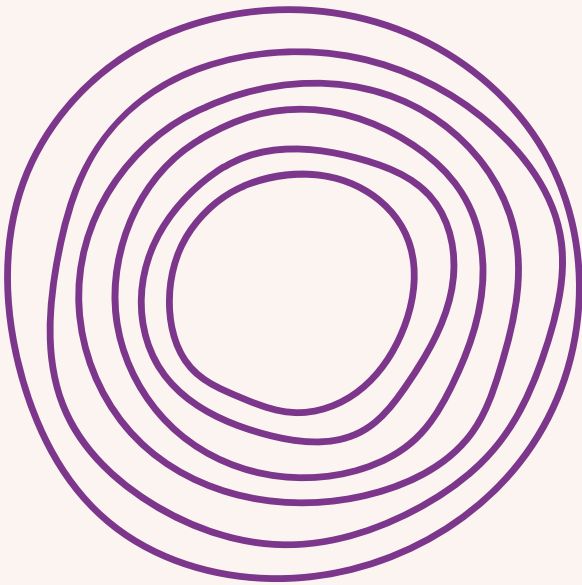
- 1. A joined-up multi-agency response to paramilitary-related coercive control is needed.** The Foyle Family Justice Centre<sup>9</sup> is a space where agencies can jointly work together and ensure cooperative approaches are taken. A common understanding of and approach to how paramilitary-related coercive control affects victims of abuse should be developed and should be based on a gendered understanding of contemporary paramilitarisms. That common approach should form a central basis of joined-up approaches.
- 2. The political, policy and services sectors should develop protocols that specifically support women attempting to navigate and exit from a ‘group-based’ reality of coercive control.** Protocols and support measures should be trauma-informed, include safety planning that responds to group-based networks of surveillance and control and that support women who are entrapped by the intricacies of individual-to-group based layers of control. Approaches to group-based coercive control should be informed and led by women’s own understanding of their realities and on their terms.
- 3. The political, policy and services sectors need to ensure that gendered analysis informs understanding of and response to women’s experiences of violence generally, and particularly their experiences of paramilitarisms.** Policy, programming and services need to respond to the layered dynamics of coercive control from the community into the home.
- 4. The definition and understanding of paramilitary threat, and of threat generally, used by policy and the services sector needs to be informed by a gendered understanding of ‘threat’ and the kinds of threat that women specifically experience.** In particular, police and housing responses need to take into account the reality of the context in which women experience threat (e.g. in the home). Women’s own understanding of *feeling under threat* should be taken seriously and form part of how policy responses are made.
- 5. The political, policy and services sectors should be informed by better understanding of women and girls’ lived experience of paramilitary-related sexualised violence and exploitation taking place (affecting all genders)** at the broader community level, as well as at intimate levels. Appropriate responses that are victim–survivor-led and -informed should be developed through multi-agency approaches.
- 6. Service-providing organisations, including policing, need to provide support to women, and engage with them primarily as victim–survivors of intimate partner violence.** The paramilitary-related elements of their relationship and abuse need to be taken seriously, on their terms, but not become the primary interest in the ways that support is provided.
- 7. All police units, regardless of their specific role, should be trained on how paramilitary-related broader social controls are gendered and are co-opted into intimate relationships.** That understanding should be brought into policy and operative responses to women’s experiences of IPV, particularly in communities where paramilitarisms are present. The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control could be used as a training tool for policing and other policy organisations.
- 8. The experiences that women have shared in this report should be used to evolve a gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding within macro political processes, as well as within programming that tackles paramilitarism.** There is significant work led by women’s

organisations at community levels supporting women living in paramilitary controlled communities.<sup>10</sup> Political and policy processes need to listen to women's voices and ensure that actions are taken in response to what women have clearly articulated are their key priorities, interests and needs.

- 9. The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control should be used to advance better understanding of conflict-related coercive control within Northern Ireland, and beyond.** Further research in other geographical areas of Northern Ireland is needed to develop specific understanding of local nuances of paramilitary-related conventions and controls and to develop tailored policy and programming responses. **The framework should also be retrospectively applied to examine Troubles-related gendered violence to enhance better understanding of women's**

**experiences of harm during the Troubles.** The evidence generated should be used to advance efforts to address the gap in accountability for women's experiences of Troubles-related gendered violence.

- 10. This research on conflict-related coercive control in Northern Ireland should be used to inform and expand global policy dialogue and debate on women's experiences of gendered harm related to conflict.** The framework could also be adapted to and used in other conflict-affected sites globally to make visible and deepen understanding of gendered conflict-related coercive control by non-state actors.



*No one should live in fear*





# 1. INTRODUCTION

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*It's that added fear. There's always fear in coercive control anyway ... but it's that extra bit where you can't speak to anybody ... because of the paramilitary involvement. The threat of the paramilitary, because he will use that as a threat, [and while] it may not necessarily be true, to the woman it doesn't matter because it's in her head, it's there, it's a fear, you know. So coercive control ... nearly every domestic violence relationship has that control in it. But with regards to paramilitaries, it's that extra fear that [women] can't even say what their fears are because what can of worms is that going to open for them, and possibly for him.*<sup>11</sup>

To view paramilitarism in Northern Ireland through the lens of women's lives is to understand it as it is lived and experienced. It shifts 'classic' understandings of paramilitarism, often emblematic of and driven by paramilitaries' own self-sustaining lore, towards a more representative reality, which those interviewed for this research articulated as lives characterised by 'double the fear'.<sup>12</sup>

'It's that fear ... when you know what they are capable of'<sup>13</sup> that sets the backdrop to the harm women experience and that gives it potency and meaning in and for their lives. Whether on a *collective basis as a group or on an individual basis by members* using or feigning paramilitary affiliation, knowing that there is group-based capacity in the background, intensifies women's experiences of abuse. That abuse includes individual and group-perpetrated physical violence, rape, strangulation, coercive control, emotional and financial abuse, surveillance, intimidation, threat and forced displacement. The 'doubling' of fear comes from how those intimacies of abuse are situated within the wider landscape of paramilitary capabilities, including historical violence during Northern Ireland's Troubles, as well as continuing exploitation and intimidation at community levels.<sup>14</sup>

The Independent Reporting Commission on paramilitarism (IRC) has acknowledged the need to continue to advance understanding of the 'true reality' of paramilitarism. It notes that tackling paramilitarism is the 'unseen part' of the work towards the comprehensive peace still to be achieved in Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> The IRC, as well as a range of political, policy and civic society initiatives, increasingly name 'coercive control' as the means through which paramilitarism could be understood and responded to in the contemporary period.<sup>16</sup>

It is the contention of this report that addressing that 'unseen part' requires deepening the understanding of *women's experiences* of paramilitarism, as well as the *gendered nature* of the coercive environment that sustains its authority. 'Coercive control' as a concept was originally developed to explain coercive and controlling behaviour by one partner over another within intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>17</sup> If that concept is to be adapted for use *outside of the context of IPV*, and *instead applied to paramilitarism*, fuller examination is required to assess how layers of paramilitary-related political and social control interact with, and operate on top of, IPV-related controls.

This research aims to deepen understanding of women's experiences of contemporary paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. It evidences the coercive net in which some women live their lives – how coercion colours their intimate, familial and community relationships, as well as their ability to seek help and their experience of services when they do. It focuses on women who are experiencing IPV in their intimate relationships with men, who in variant ways, draw paramilitarism into their relationship.

The research presents a new 'Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control'. The Framework applies the concept of coercive control to paramilitarism to enhance understanding of the relationship between

coercive control in women's relationships and its basis in wider paramilitary controls. The Framework is provided as a tool to rethink and enhance political and service sector responses to paramilitary-related coercion and control. Box 1 outlines the scope and methodology of the research.

The report first sets out the background to contemporary paramilitarism and the concept of coercive control. It then establishes an

approach for adapting the concept of coercive control to paramilitarism. Following this, the 'Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control' is presented and sets out the major findings of the research. The report concludes by discussing key considerations and providing recommendations to ensure that actions are taken in response to what women tell us are their key priorities, interests and needs.

### Box 1: Scope and Methodology of the Research

The research was conducted by the author in conjunction with Foyle Women's Aid and the Family Justice Centre from 2021 to 2023. The research is motivated by the need to evidence women's experiences and to advance gendered responses to the nexus between gendered violence, coercive control, paramilitarism and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.

The research focuses on the North-West region, and mainly Derry/Londonderry areas. It draws from two focus groups and 30 interviews that included victim-survivors whose experiences of IPV were in some way affected by paramilitarism and with political, community and service sector workers. The study received ethics approval from University College Dublin. All interviews were designed and held in line with trauma-informed approaches. Annex 1 provides full details of the scope and methodology of the research.

The research was challenged by being able to safely reach women in contexts of control, exemplified by one respondent who said:

*'Nobody is going to talk about paramilitarism if it's current ... Why would you, if you were married to a paramilitary would you talk about it, sure you'd get shot.'*<sup>232</sup>

Fear of reprisal impacted the number of women able to come forward to share their experiences. This signifies that there are likely even more women unable to report to services and it underlines the degree to which fear of paramilitary reprisal dictates people's lives. There is need for services and research that are safe, ethical and trauma-informed going forward so that understanding of women's experiences of contemporary paramilitarism continues to be advanced and to inform political responses.

## 2. CONTEMPORARY PARAMILITARISMS AND COERCIVE CONTROL

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The background to the contemporary paramilitary landscape is first outlined, followed by an overview of the concept of ‘coercive control’ and how it might be used to understand paramilitary-related controls.

### 2.1 Contemporary Paramilitarisms: Dynamics and Capabilities

Emerging during the Northern Ireland Troubles,<sup>18</sup> ‘Loyalist’ and ‘Republican’ paramilitary organisations enacted violence towards each other across ethno-national lines, towards groups within their own ‘sides’ during inter-factional disputes, and invariably, towards state actors. That violence had direct and indirect impacts on civilians across all communities. It included a range of gendered violence impacting women and girls that was directly and indirectly related to the political violence of the conflict.<sup>19</sup>

The 2023 report of the IRC and the ‘Peace Monitoring Report’ both expressed significant concern over continuing paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, including in particular ‘dissident republican’ activity in the northwest region, and criminality linked to ‘loyalist’ paramilitary groups more broadly.<sup>20</sup> While security incidents at a macro-political level have overall decreased, there has been a documented increase in paramilitary-related assaults over the last decade, even despite the likelihood of underreporting.<sup>21</sup> Fourteen ‘proscribed organisations’ remain listed since the adoption of the Terrorism Act (2000), while the terrorist threat level in Northern Ireland is estimated to be ‘substantial’ (reduced from ‘severe’ in March 2024).<sup>22</sup> It remains an ongoing concern for community life, and more generally, for moves towards consolidating peace.


The statistics and security assessment above obscures contemporary paramilitary intricacies, which now ‘involves a complex landscape comprising different categories of people’<sup>23</sup> with a range of motives and activities. This

includes groups, and their members, who adhere to long-held political and ethno-nationalist aspirations (i.e. ‘terrorist’ groups as above); groups and/or individuals who use paramilitary histories and identities for broader political and economic advantage, including criminal enterprise; and individuals, who may be members of or feign association with such groups, solely for individualistic motivations and advantage.<sup>24</sup>

While for many people in Northern Ireland, paramilitary activity does not affect their day-to-day lives, for others it is a continuing reality. Some communities or towns, considered ‘sectarian enclaves’, remain under significant influence and control of ‘former’ paramilitary organisations,<sup>25</sup> as well as present-day ‘dissident’ organisations who target state actors, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).<sup>26</sup> Dynamics of ‘spatial segregation’<sup>27</sup> mean that paramilitary groups, where present, will be experienced differently across different communities, and in turn, how they are responded to in terms of ‘the cultural differences ... [between regions] ... can be enormous’.<sup>28</sup>

From here, this report uses the term ‘paramilitarisms’ to reflect the variation and the diffuse range of ‘groups’ and individuals whose roles or activities directly or indirectly derive from associated status during the Troubles.

The continuing attribution of paramilitary status to *all* of these actors is increasingly critiqued as offering a false representation of what are otherwise felt to be criminal and gang-like behaviours.<sup>29</sup> It is also the case however that their political histories and embeddedness in communities affords them a representative status that for many, positions them as more than simply a criminal gang.<sup>30</sup> On balance, rather than ‘giving them more legitimacy than they deserve’,<sup>31</sup> many communities, political and policy actors, and academics question whether the idea of “‘coercive control” [might] better explain what is happening’.<sup>32</sup>



The term ‘coercive control’ is used to describe an ‘underappreciated dimension of the overall paramilitary issue’.<sup>33</sup> It is increasingly visible across policy, such as the Fresh Start Agreement and its related action plan.<sup>34</sup> For example, the latter plan aims to foster a post-agreement society ‘in which paramilitarism has no place and communities are safer and more resilient to coercive control’.<sup>35</sup> Coercive control, in that policy context, is used to refer to widely documented paramilitary activities that include: so-called ‘punishment’ attacks; murder; forced drug dealing and debt controls; commercial exploitation and extortion; loan sharking; protection rackets; forced prostitution; human trafficking; forced recruitment; general grooming, as well as grooming for the purposes of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly of youth of all genders.<sup>36</sup> These are significant harms, which collectively signal an organised and controlling force at community levels.

Coercive control is more usually applied to IPV and there is growing understanding of coercive control as a form of IPV within Northern Ireland,<sup>37</sup> including through recent legislation.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (2022) recognises that behaviours and forms of communication that are threatening and intimidating, that create fear and involve the control and monitoring of everyday life, conducted on a personal or indirect basis through third parties, are offences of coercive abuse.<sup>39</sup>

Applying coercive control beyond IPV and instead to the dynamics of paramilitary (non-state actor) authority and control, or to how paramilitarism is sustained in the current era, is however, arguably, in nascent stages of full understanding and response, both in Northern Ireland and beyond. How coercive control is used as an *effective operative mechanism*, and specifically how paramilitary-related controls relate to women’s lives and experiences of gendered violence, requires more exploration.

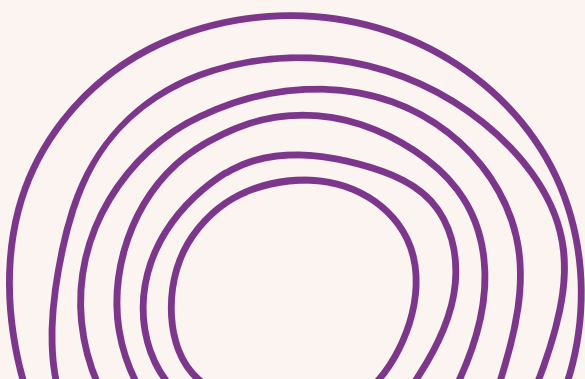
## 2.2 Coercive Control: Concept Origins and Application

The idea of the *coercion* and the *control* of one partner by another has underpinned decades of evolving research and policy understanding of IPV. More recently ‘coercive control’ has been recognised as a distinct form of harm. Coercive control is now understood as both a *dynamic that underpins* situations of IPV, as well as a specific form and method of harm, for the dominance and control of a partner.<sup>40</sup>

Coercive control is a ‘cumulative’ harm. While it may include violence, it is a term primarily used to describe how sustained *patterns* of *insidious harms* and *behaviours* build slowly towards the full coercion and control of a woman’s personhood, life and habits.<sup>41</sup> Coercive control relies on tactics that create a chronic environment of fear, dependence, shame and compliance and that occur in isolated, intersecting or layered ways, and include:

- Threat of, or actual use of, physical and sexual violence, strangulation, emotional, economic and psychological abuse
- Indignities and admonishments, subtle comments that undermine self-hood, confidence and personal security, and that curtail basic day-to-day liberties and choice-making
- Isolation, intimidation, surveillance, stalking
- Insidious subtle expectations, as well as demands and obligations tied to normative gendered roles that are made exploitative (related to sex, the home, public life)
- Withholding and deprivation of necessary life resources, such as money and transportation
- Control of, or extraction of, resources belonging to the victim
- Threat of, and actual abuse towards, children, relatives, friends and pets.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the harms of coercive control are imperceptible, making it difficult to ascertain how such tactics become *so effective* at gaining jurisdiction over a person and a setting, such as a home or a community.



To address this, the 'coercive power model' is used within IPV settings to explain the 'potential influence' and ability that one person ('the coercer') has to impose their will on another ('the target').<sup>43</sup>

The coercive power model first establishes that the social backdrop to coercive control matters. **Context-specific social factors contribute to power over someone**, for example, gender inequalities generate specific vulnerabilities for women to chronic violence and control.<sup>44</sup>

On the basis of that social context, social *power-over* becomes a *process* through which one person imposes on another, things, acts or behaviours that they *do not want*, or curtails or restricts things that they *do want*.<sup>45</sup> That process of control is understood to involve the following series of steps:

**First, the coercer establishes a legitimate basis for coercion by 'setting the stage' for their power.** This may involve exploiting existing power differentials or generating a sense of obligation on the part of the target to comply with a demand (e.g. emotional blackmail, excessive gifting or complimenting so the target 'owes' the coercer).

**Second, the target's vulnerabilities are exploited** to create a situation that enables control over them (e.g. exploiting financial precarity or past experiences of abuse).

**Third, the coercer uses threats and in some cases harm to make demands and exert control**, and then **fourth, uses surveillance**, to reinforce that control and related demands.

**Fifth, the threatened harm is delivered if demands have not been complied with.**

Weaved in throughout these steps are the **responses to, and impacts of the coercion, on the target.**

**Coercive power and coercive control rely on an 'or else'<sup>46</sup> manipulative ploy.** Stage-setting establishes the legitimacy of the coercer's threats and heightens the vulnerability of the target to the potential of future harm for non-compliance with demands. Tactics of surveillance, intimidation, threat and abuse establish a perception on the part of the target that they are living within an omnipotent system of control. This prompts regulation of behaviour on the part of the target to manage and mitigate further threat and harm, fulfilling coercive control (or leaving the relationship eventually).

The coercive power model shows why these steps are effective:

- Coercive tactics establish a belief on the part of the target that there will be a negative outcome if they do not comply favourably with the demand, i.e. that they have a 'choice' and it is their fault if there is a negative outcome when they do not comply.
- Coercive tactics simultaneously establish a system of 'reward power', i.e. if the target complies with the demand, then a 'reward' is granted (e.g. the threatened harm is removed by the coercer, or benefits are given or reinstated, such as access to finances or children).

While the target's beliefs or values might not change, e.g. that the coercer is acting in bad faith, the tactics do secure *behaviours* that comply with the coercive demand or harm.<sup>47</sup>

This model of coercive power is now applied to paramilitarisms as a lens to examine and explain how paramilitary-related control operates and is effective in controlling women and their lives.

### 3. ‘THEY CAN DO ANYTHING’:<sup>48</sup> FRAMEWORK OF PARAMILITARY-RELATED COERCIVE CONTROL

Using the findings of this research, the above coercive power model is adapted to create a new *Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control*.

The Framework primarily **focuses on women’s experiences of paramilitary-related coercive control within their intimate relationships**. By doing so, it also evidences *the layers of paramilitary control from intimate to community levels*. It is thereby presented as a tool to explain and understand how coercive control may be applied to paramilitarisms and how they are so effective at controlling entire communities, as well as individual women.

The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control is made up of both the context-specific factors, as well as the steps (outlined above) that enable coercive control:

**Figure 1** illustrates context-specific factors that contribute to coercive control. This part of the Framework is called the **Socio-Ecological Coercive Context** to paramilitary-related coercive control.

**Figure 2** maps the steps and processes involved in how **paramilitary-related coercive control operates**. It is situated within Figure 1.

**Figure 1 and Figure 2** are components of **one overall framework** and should be read as a combined *Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control*:

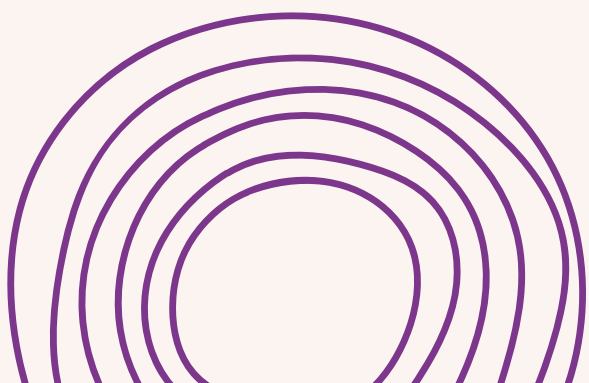
#### Socio-Ecological Coercive Context (See figure 1)

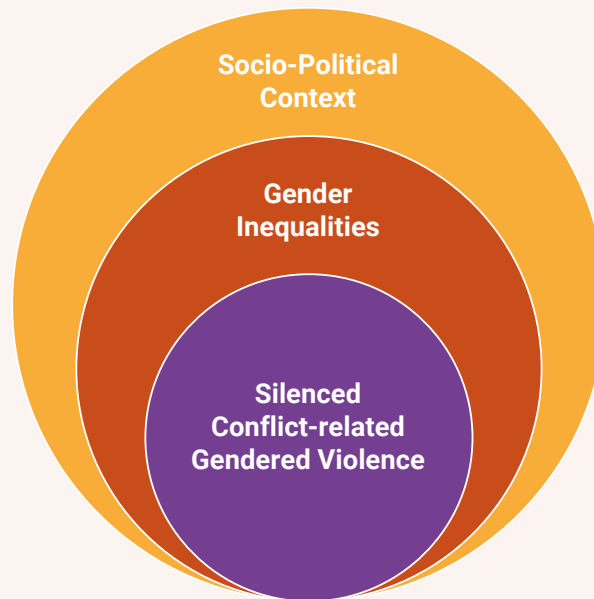
Many contextual factors underpin how paramilitary-related coercion generates control. Three main factors are identified here as particularly relevant for controls over women: *socio-political histories of paramilitary convention, everyday gender inequalities and the silencing of gendered violence*:

##### (i) Historical and Contemporary Socio-Political Context: Normative Paramilitary Convention

Contemporary paramilitarisms do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they mutually exclusive from the communities in which they reside, and the political histories from which they draw meaning. The IRC has noted that ‘there is a residual political dimension to the continuation of paramilitarism today’,<sup>49</sup> underlined by one respondent to this research: ‘you’re going to hear of historical things because like, did you think it only just started happening?’.<sup>50</sup>

During the Troubles, paramilitary organisations evolved de facto systems of governing authority over their communities (particularly in Republican areas). While serving multiple functions, such as the provision of services, protection of communities and maintenance of a militarised powerbase for operations, that authority also allowed the range and scope of paramilitary influence to extend into broader aspects of community and private life. Paramilitary membership brought significant material benefits, social status and authority, and with it leverage, cover and impunity.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, the *actual* authority of the paramilitary collective as a group extended towards individual members, offering them an *implicit* authority in respect of their families





and communities.<sup>52</sup> This had a multiplier effect on forms of violence permissible beyond the political tactics of the conflict, including, inter alia, violence, controls and punishments on community members in the name of ‘justice’, and dynamics of gendered harm within private spaces.<sup>53</sup>

These histories, roles and rituals of violence and control have become the expected and normative ways of *doing paramilitarism*. The research identifies the term ‘**paramilitary convention**’ to describe the **pattern of practices, behaviours, roles, disciplinary measures, rituals and lore associated with and ‘known’ by those living around it as ‘paramilitarisms’**. These conventions constitute aspects of the social context that communities have come to *know, envisage* and *expect* as the customary habits of paramilitarisms. It is *paramilitary convention*, understood by paramilitaries themselves as the basis of their coercive power, and by women and communities as the factors that determine consequences for non-compliance with that authority, that enables ‘paramilitarism’ as an idea and convention to be effective, and to sustain and enforce coercion, threat and control today.

For example, a community worker witnessed paramilitaries gaining tacit control over a local community centre and its funding. While they and others raised objections, they already knew what the response would be:

*We were all laughing about it after. This is how normal it’s become. We were going, aye we’ll be getting knocks at our doors and the knees will be getting done at the weekend. And we’ll be told to get out ... that’s the way the people were talking about it. Because you’re so normalised to it ... they were posting letters out, I actually blocked my letterbox ... because I didn’t know what they were going to put through. And I slept on the sofa for three nights because I didn’t know if they going to come at my car, or come at my house. With the blinds open, so I could watch.*<sup>54</sup>

As noted previously that historical–contemporary vestige of paramilitary convention has people living around that idea of knowing ‘what they are capable of’,<sup>55</sup> i.e. the context matters:

*If you look at it in the course of the whole political context, you’re dealing with an organisation that you know, has killed people, can abduct people ... can take them away and bury them and nobody finds them for years ... all of that sounds kind of dramatic now, but at the time it was a very, very real thing.<sup>56</sup>*

In the current era, the ‘Communities in Transition’ programme in Derry/Londonderry found that 63% of participants felt that paramilitaries generate fear and intimidation in their area (with the average across the programme regionally at 27%, and with much lower numbers outside of communities without direct paramilitary presence).<sup>57</sup> The 2023 Peace Monitoring Report notes that ‘dissident republican groups continue to have the capacity and motivation to launch deadly attacks, and all paramilitary groups continue to exploit, attack and intimidate sections of their own communities’.<sup>58</sup>

The latter is significant. Paramilitary-related harm is directed towards members of *their own* communities where ‘the dynamic changed from political violence to coercive violence’.<sup>59</sup> In the current era, there is the perception that ‘now they’re more likely to attack someone from this area than defend it from an outsider’.<sup>60</sup> That dynamic establishes the expectation and atmospheric context necessary for coercive power. It is estimated that ‘control is insidious and involves communities and individuals adapting their behaviour to avoid the attention of paramilitaries’.<sup>61</sup> Further, the historical idea of paramilitary protection, heroism and loyalty is sustained<sup>62</sup> and the ‘fear of what can happen, rather than what is’<sup>63</sup> remains significant. This establishes a wider ‘[a]cceptance that some parents want their kids to be shot – if you don’t it’s going to be worse – this is what keeps women in relationships ... if I leave it’ll be worse’.<sup>64</sup>

Paramilitary conventions generate the ‘real fear that’s still there in women of that paramilitary involvement’<sup>65</sup> and sets the backdrop to the coercive ‘choices’ women are compelled to make within their relationships and community life.

## (ii) Gender Inequalities and Gendered Violence

Men’s coercive control of women, like broader forms of IPV, is rooted in historical patterns of gendered inequalities across legal, economic, political and social realms. This has established an overarching social condition in which men’s violence towards women has become a normative and tolerated phenomenon.<sup>66</sup>

Many of the tactics of men’s coercive control of women draw from expected gendered norms of (in this case western) heterosexual dating and relationship interaction. For example, the use of compliments, buying of clothes as gifts, knowing where a partner is, and the effusive expression of emotional commitment are instantly recognisable patterns that form the ‘normative script for heterosexual courtship’.<sup>67</sup> They are, however, simultaneously the basis for undermining confidence, exploiting insecurities and dominating women’s self-hood (for example through controlling what women wear, shaming of women’s bodies).<sup>68</sup> Coercive control is not just a harm that is ‘invisible in plain sight’,<sup>69</sup> but also a gendered dynamic that exploits historical heterosexist inequalities and unequal sexual freedoms and rights.<sup>70</sup>

This is essential context to *women’s own understanding* of and response to coercion and threat. For example, when men ‘simply’ threaten or issue a warning of some kind (for example through a ‘loaded look’), its meaning comes not just from the threat itself, in that moment. Rather, it is informed by ingrained knowledge and habit among women of ways to keep safe in a world where there are systemic patterns of men’s control of and violence towards women, and ultimately, patterns of homicide of women in the context of intimate relationships. Efforts by men to control women

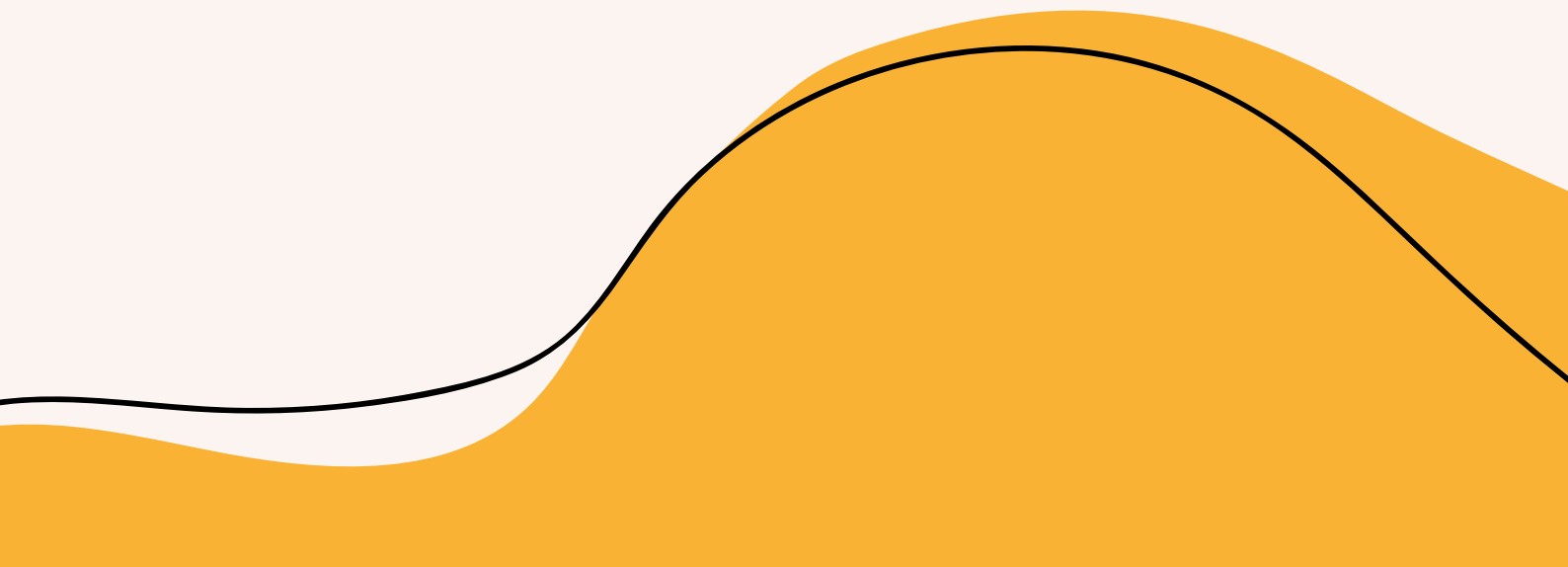
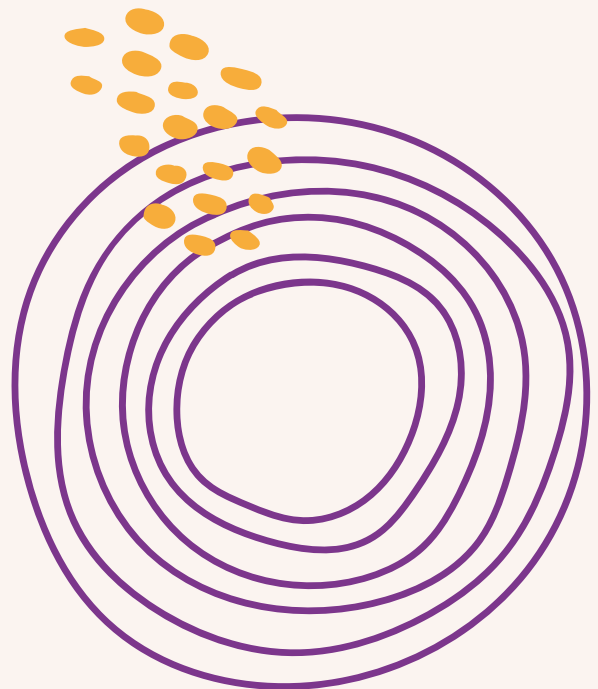
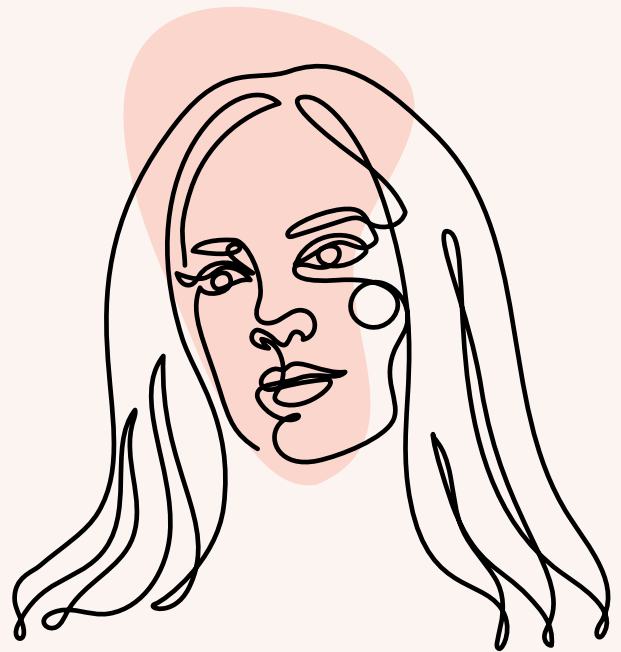


through threat and consequence are *effective because the threat is understood by women as real*. This is the preliminary context to how women will approach and understand coercion and abuse coming from men and from masculinised paramilitary elements.

### **(iii) Silencing of Gendered Violence Related to the Troubles**

Both globally and within Northern Ireland, women's experiences of everyday gendered violence receive little legal accountability or response, which undermines efforts to deter its prevalence.<sup>71</sup> Troubles-related gendered violence has also received little accountability, or even visibility.<sup>72</sup> It is evident however that the conflict influenced patterns of IPV and women's ability to access services;<sup>73</sup> that gendered violence was used in arrest, detention and imprisonment by state actors;<sup>74</sup> and that paramilitary violence, individually and collectively, involved sexualised assault, murder and punishments targeted at women, and that LGBTQI+ people were also specifically targeted.<sup>75</sup>

It becomes evident, as well as significant, that the historical silencing of Troubles-related gendered violence and its exclusion from processes for 'dealing with the past'<sup>76</sup> are a contributory factor to how it continues to constitute patterns of paramilitary-related control of communities.<sup>77</sup> Those patterns have not been disrupted by either formal recognition that conflict-related gendered harms existed, or accountability processes that halt and inhibit them. The historic context of silencing of women's experiences enables the continuing silence around paramilitary-related gendered coercive control of women.



In all, the dynamic of historical-to-contemporary socio-political conventions of paramilitarisms, and patterns of sustained gendered violence and inequalities, provide significant context that enables and sustains effective paramilitary-related coercive control of women. The steps involved in this are outlined in the next part of the Framework.

## Paramilitary-related Coercive Control: Operative Process (See figure 2)

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Figure 2 maps the key components involved in paramilitary-related gendered coercive control of women. Each component is discussed below, illustrating the findings of the research and what it implies for understanding and response.

### (i) Paramilitary Convention as Stage-Setting

'Stage-setting' is the initial phase of coercive control whereby the coercer makes it clear to the target that the conditions and/or the means are in place to make a threat a reality. It may involve creating the *expectancy* of future harm (the 'or else' ploy), exploiting vulnerabilities, and/or creating dependencies.<sup>78</sup> Tactics vary, but establish a convincing basis for demand, threat and ultimately control.

This research identified that paramilitary-related stage-setting is created in two ways:

- First, on a group-basis: the cumulative historic and contemporary presence of paramilitarisms (as above) has established a chronic dynamic of coercion that now legitimates group-based authority;
- Second, on an individual/ and individual-to-group basis: a woman's partner establishes stage-setting within the relationship in ways typical to IPV (more below), as well as, by drawing the wider chronic presence of paramilitarism into the relationship, doubling the layers of stage-setting.

As noted by one woman who experienced paramilitary-related IPV:

*He didn't actually have to come out ... [and] say, "I'll get such and such to give you a wee visit." It was because he had already laid the groundwork by saying "I'm involved with this person or that person, this group".<sup>79</sup>*

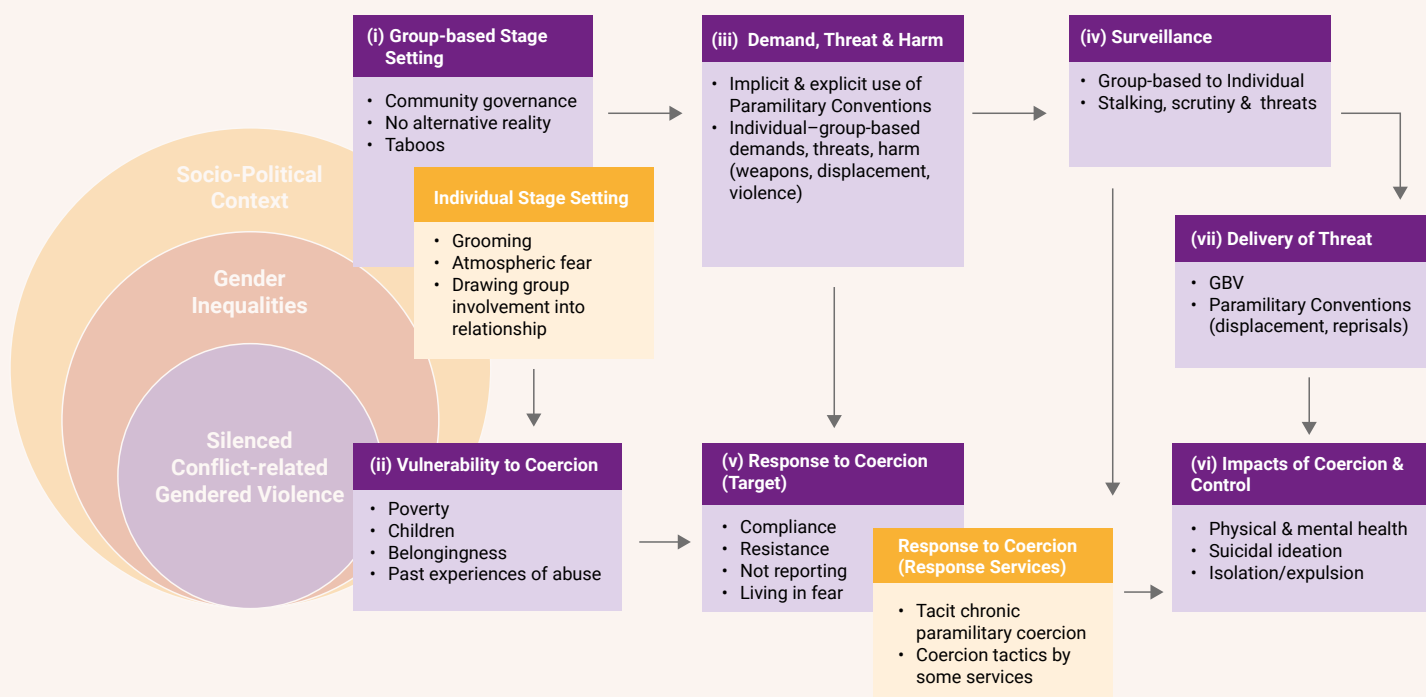
That 'laying the groundwork', i.e. stage-setting, operates in layers in relation to paramilitarism. For simplicity, 'group-based stage-setting' and 'individual-to-group stage-setting' are set out below.

### Group-based Stage-Setting: Paramilitarism as 'Community'

Striking across this research was the use of the term 'community threats' to describe what were then clarified to be 'paramilitary threats'. As one respondent noted: 'No it's paramilitary threats. It's not community threats, it's definitely paramilitary'.<sup>80</sup> Another referred to 'our' version of 'terrorism' and 'local paramilitaries'<sup>81</sup> – evoking a familiarity distinguishing these groups from macro terrorism across the UK, or globally. Paramilitarism is a known thing: 'the community knows who's in what'<sup>82</sup> while community geographies are organised around "'no-go" area[s] ... where the paramilitaries will take someone'.<sup>83</sup> Euphemisms signal the extension of paramilitarism into aspects of familial and community life, until **they have become and are 'the community', which in turn establishes the basis for chronic and cumulative social control.**

Combined with the criminal enterprise and social controls outlined before, paramilitarism's de facto **community governance role** has engineered the stage upon which coercive threat and control is established and maintained. They, for example, in some instances take over community organisations, or become the defacto community organisation, community representative and 'community' – that issues threats and also solves them<sup>84</sup>:

**Figure 2 Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control**



... the community organisations will deal directly with the paramilitaries ... you go to the local community leaders that maybe would be in negotiation with them on different things and that's how that is. <sup>85</sup>

and

There are certain, like, community centres that I would hear people saying, "oh I had to go there, and they told me that it's a genuine a threat". So, it's a community representative, and they are the ones that deem if it's a real threat or not. <sup>86</sup>

establishes the debt-and-reward dialectic, a key basis of stage-setting for coercive control (outlined before). For example, 'where [women] "owe" money, because, for example, their children participated in events led by the local community organisation, and when they leave, a knock comes to the door ... "you owe us 50 pound"'<sup>88</sup> for whatever material resources the child used (which has already ostensibly been paid for by government community funding). Being in debt to them like this means that 'you're tied in then' and either the woman or her child are suddenly 'involved' in activities as a way of paying off the 'debt'.<sup>89</sup>

Paramilitary stage-setting is reinforced by **access to funding for 'community' organisations**, an issue that is heavily critiqued: 'communities see money going into their area yet they're not benefitting from it ... and if you speak up about it, like, you will be a legitimate target'.<sup>87</sup> Reprisals for speaking out reinforce stage-setting and sustain continued paramilitary authority.

Control of community organisations and funding

The idea that 'you always had **protection**'<sup>90</sup> also carries over from the Troubles into contemporary stage-setting. It involves grooming strategies such as '[b]efriending you. I'm doing this for you, this is to keep you safe ... don't want you getting any bother or any knocks at your doors'.<sup>91</sup> That protection in turn demands **allegiance**, accompanied by the sustained idea of **belonging** to the 'group' and to 'the community', and in some cases, to 'the idea of loyalty to the cause ... you cannot betray

the cause'.<sup>92</sup> The risk of losing that 'belonging' to 'the community' enables 'preying on the fears of community exclusion (symbolic and literal)',<sup>93</sup> a key stage-setting tactic. Service sector workers noted that this element matters for women in relationships with men involved in paramilitarism: 'the "we" – it is part of a system, of an "us" – it's not just individual'.<sup>94</sup> Two service sector workers described the experience of clients, one of whom was told by her partner: 'that child is ours, it's not yours. It belongs to "us", the family.'<sup>95</sup> To leave means leaving 'the family', a key issue for women trying to 'extract themselves',<sup>96</sup> and in some cases means leaving children behind in 'the family'.<sup>97</sup> This is equally relevant for women leaving more casual relationships, where it becomes 'a nightmare to get out of the relationship'.<sup>98</sup>

Stage-setting establishes and **exploits historical taboos of speaking openly about paramilitarism**. Related risk draws from 'dominant community norms [that] actively prevent information sharing, an activity known colloquially known as "touting"'.<sup>99</sup> The idea of touting is so potent that four victim-survivors in this research mentioned being labelled 'a tout' as one of their greatest fears and as determining their 'choices' over whether to seek help for abuse.<sup>100</sup> One noted the fear '[t]hat I would be shot, and I'd be classed as a tout and stuff like that' and also mentioned past practices of being 'tarred and feathered' as a fear present in her mind today.<sup>101</sup> Paramilitary conventions such as these establish the basis for potential harm should those norms be transgressed. In a community organisation, where infiltration by paramilitarism was raised as a concern by staff, they were told 'somebody in here is touting ... I've worked with people [who will] get a knife and cut you from there and slice you, that's the kind of people I speak to daily'. For the respondent involved: 'that left a lot of them (staff) terrified'.<sup>102</sup>

Police officers stated that women experiencing abuse will say to them: 'you can't protect me. He is in the IRA, or his brother is in the IRA, and they are in the INLA, you know, it will get far worse if I speak to you'.<sup>103</sup> Reporting to police continues to be aligned with the idea of 'touting'. In one instance, after a woman had

called the police,

she was standing at the door with blood dripping from her with her baby in her arms and a neighbour, whom she knew was involved, approached her and asked "did you call the police" – and shook his head when she said yes. You still cannot call the police, she was in danger for doing so.<sup>104</sup>

In the same vein, paramilitaries become the 'choice' for women, who may also use those structures to get the abuse to stop.<sup>105</sup> The paramilitaries are seen by some as the option 'to get it sorted another way ... to tell the boys to have a word with him'.<sup>106</sup> This also removes the involvement of formal services and the risk that children will be removed from her care by state services.

One respondent, having described the ways in which paramilitaries will use abuse to control communities, summed up the general atmospheric context by saying:

*'People are scared.'*<sup>107</sup>

In all, paramilitary stage-setting conventions create a 'no alternatives' reality. The risk of reprisal, such as harm or social exclusion, cumulatively generates a context in which the only 'free choice' available is to work within the paramilitary system of control. That becomes the 'safe' option – with the reward being that harm is reduced, and permission is granted to continue living in your community within their parameters.



## **Individual-to-Group Stage-Setting**

Stage-setting tactics by the individual coercer, which are broadly common to IPV, were experienced by women in this research. This included grooming and 'love-bombing', such as gifting, introducing family very quickly,<sup>108</sup> 'constant, constant accusations of cheating and going through my phone',<sup>109</sup> being obsessive or excessively jealous, and becoming a persistent presence from the outset: '[h]e was stuck like glue with me'.<sup>110</sup> In one case, upon first meeting him, her partner told her a story of victimhood as a child and coerced his way into a relationship. When later trying to extract herself from that relationship and the wider paramilitary threat that accompanied it, she was approached on the street by another man who 'had the exact same type of stories'.<sup>111</sup> Stories of woe, of childhood victimhood, are used to construct dependencies between the coercer and the target as the basis of coercion. And they are delivered in tandem between men who know each other/or are involved in paramilitarism.

*Two respondents became pregnant very quickly,<sup>112</sup> while for one '[h]e moved himself into my house without having a conversation with me about it'<sup>113</sup>*

and another:

*He kind of moved himself in quite quick ... he had, like, a flat of his own. But he kept bringing, you know, like, a football bag up with all his stuff and leaving stuff in the house ... So all of a sudden he was just there in my house.<sup>114</sup>*

These are key strategies of solidifying control over space and life. The **creation of an atmosphere of fear to solidify that control follows**, with swift repercussions if women do not comply with expectations:

*... it started early on ... for the first month we were fine. Then I didn't turn up one night on time and he took my phone and then he smashed the phone and spat on me ... it just got worse as time went on.<sup>115</sup>*

**Atmospheric stage-setting is deepened when 'individual-to-group' strategies are used, i.e.**

the coercer draws paramilitary (third-party) chronic control at community levels into the tactics they are using within the relationship, creating layers to the stage-setting. **Paramilitary conventions are exploited to evidence the potential for group-based control coming into the relationship.** This mattered greatly:

that definitely raised the level of fear ... especially when he started getting third parties involved. I mean I thought, is this another guy from his group – could it be one of them? ... is he also paramilitary? And the other one that said, "get out of Derry, why are you still here?" So then I'm thinking, he is using a third party, there must be more of them, he's got his whole gang now involved.<sup>116</sup>

Coercers deliberately make their involvement in paramilitarisms known to the target:

*... there was a video sent ... the IRA fella I used to go with and his brother ... videos of them fighting with boys in the street with hammers and knives and stuff like that there. That just made my threat level go up, I was like right now, I don't know what he's fully capable of here.<sup>117</sup>*

In some cases, membership is real. In others, it is a feigned affiliation, or the pretence of wider family involvement. As one services sector worker noted:

*I would have had women come in and ... [he'd say to her] "well my uncle is involved in this, and ... you open your mouth and you get this and that" ... maybe it's half the time the paramilitaries themselves don't even realise that their group is being used to do this threat ... But it's definitely used as a form of control, and silencing and of scare tactics.<sup>118</sup>*

And for one respondent,

*he used to pretend that he was in the IRA ... He's not in the IRA I know that now. The police have confirmed that and all for me. But at the time he used to pretend that he was in the IRA to scare me'.<sup>119</sup> And for another 'he was telling me all these things for a specific reason, it was for me to be very, very afraid of him.<sup>120</sup>*

The socio-political context outlined before becomes relevant here. Threats linked to paramilitarisms are recognised as *real*, lending potency and meaning to the scare tactics of stage-setting:

*We have real threat of paramilitaries, you know, your life basically. That's a hell of a lot more scary than just one man, one individual who is trying to coerce you, you are talking about a heavy, heavy big scary group here. That's not to be messed with you know what I mean.*<sup>121</sup>

And another:

*... you're scared for your life, it's not just one person, it's a whole organisation. It's different with domestic abuse, you have you and your abuser. But like with an abuser that's in an organisation, you have them and the people that come along with them. And they'll look after their own too, which is a thing that like and even from an IRA or a UDA perspective, they don't like police full stop. And anybody chatting to the police is, like that's a shootable offence.*<sup>122</sup>

Coercers instrumentalise the idea of touting established by the paramilitary convention. While women fear touting, the related idea of 'belonging' is held at arms-length from full belonging to the group. For one woman:

*... to her next-door neighbour and the community she lives in she is one of them ... she's seen as one of them. But within the organisation, she doesn't belong.*<sup>123</sup>

This has significant implications. The perception by neighbours/wider community that she is a member will isolate her from related networks. However, within the organisation, she does not fully 'belong' but rather, *belongs to* a member. This places her at significant disadvantage, particularly when it comes to control over children, freedoms and choices. She is simply '[a]n instrument, she's a tool ... it's like you know a builder or a carpenter needs a toolbox, she's part of that toolbox'.<sup>124</sup>

*And that means that her experiences [are] completely diminished and she's silenced ... because she's got no support network. And she's silenced because she belongs but doesn't belong if you know what I mean, to a group that she will never fit into. She's a round peg going into a square hole, when she meets with men involved. She'll never fit in.*<sup>125</sup>

Combined, the above establishes paramilitary-related stage-setting, from community into the intimate relationship.

## (ii) Vulnerability To Coercion

The target's intersecting social, psychological, economic and political background, and wider life experiences, all play a role in susceptibility to coercion.<sup>126</sup> **Poverty is a critical issue in many communities** with 'a real increase in the working poor',<sup>127</sup> which generates vulnerabilities to paramilitary financial exploitation and extortion:

*So, during the day they're a community worker and maybe at other times they're doing other activities as well. ... [D]uring the pandemic, there was one of the women saying, "the community were delivering food parcels, I didn't take any". "Why?" "Because the boy who was delivering them to the door was the boy that shot my nephew and how can I take the food ... so we starved".*<sup>128</sup>

So too, **coercers use a woman's motherhood status**, such as threats towards adult children (e.g. 'where did you say your daughter works?'<sup>129</sup>) and exploiting 'that fear of losing your children'<sup>130</sup> because of reporting to social services. In addition, his paramilitary status places her in a difficult position in relation to services. It is difficult to say, 'I don't want my child to have contact with her father unsupervised', because 'she would have to give reasons why', but she could not, in turn, say 'he has people in that house that are paramilitaries or he plays paramilitary videos in front of the child'. Rather, 'she has this genuine fear' because he is threatening her that if she does mention anything, he is warning her that 'the repercussions against you is going to be a hell

of a lot worse'.<sup>131</sup> Further, for one woman, relayed here by a service sector worker:

*They had four children ... and her mothering skills were put under scrutiny ... and even the school run, she was being watched, the children were being watched. They were going to be ... trained up to become like Dad and be involved ... [to] be his soldiers. And ... the only reason why he procreated with her was for that purpose, that they would continue to supply the army.*<sup>132</sup>

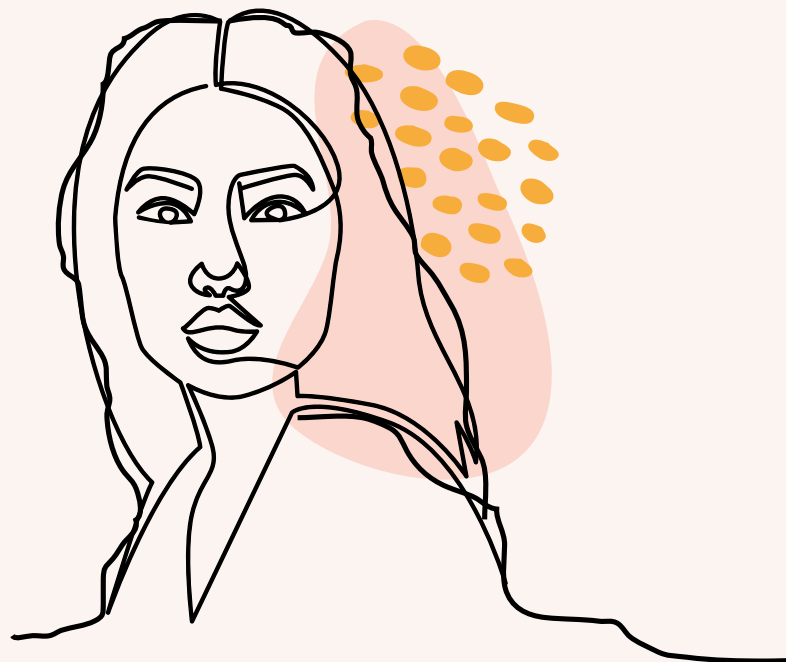
And

*She never felt that her children belonged to her. The children belonged to the cause ... if she didn't comply, you know she would be abused which she was, to such a degree that the poor woman is now dead. But ... it was never about me, me, me, it was always us, us. She was always under the impression that she wasn't battling just her husband ... It was all the other people within his army as he called it ... So, she felt that she was up against a group that she would never be able to penetrate because she was never included in the "us".*<sup>133</sup>

Perpetrators also **exploit women's past experiences**, including taunting them about previous partners who were in paramilitary groups,<sup>134</sup> or for one woman, threatening suicide when she left him, because he knew a former partner had died that way.<sup>135</sup> For another, this new partner was repeating the kind of abuse she had fled from in a previous relationship, when she had had to move for her safety.<sup>136</sup>

### **(iii) Demand, Threat and Harm: Mechanisms of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control**

Demands accompanied by threats are understood as credible by women, because of the social context and the carefully manicured stage-setting in which they take place.<sup>137</sup> In some cases, demand and threat are accompanied by ongoing IPV-related violence. For women in this research, that included abuses related to her body and style, of her movements, of her finances; isolation from



family and community; sexual demands and the use of violence as an instrument of control.

Further layers of demand and threat were experienced *related to paramilitarism*. These can be categorised as **demands and threats based on the implicit and chronic presence of paramilitarisms**, as well as **demands and threats that make explicit and tactical use of paramilitarisms**.

**Threats that draw from the implicit or chronic presence of paramilitarisms enable control within a relationship.** As noted by respondents '[t]he threat is enough'<sup>138</sup> and 'the paramilitary threat ... nearly sent me over the edge'.<sup>139</sup> Even if he may be feigning membership of a group, for those who 'think [the partner is] involved in something ... she can't take that chance'<sup>140</sup> and has to take it seriously. For one woman, as relayed here by a services sector worker:

*She was one of the ones who said to me, even though the physical and sexual violence was horrendous, the fear of what he could do to me with regards to the paramilitary links was worse than all the beatings, all the sexual violence. It was worse. Because she said she never knew the day and the hour, she never knew, she never felt safe, she never felt secure, she always felt watched. She felt like her life did not belong to her, it belonged to him and them.*<sup>141</sup>

For another victim–survivor, it affected her entire family: ‘even the pressure alone of what he was in and stuff like that there. [It] put a lot of strain on my mother physically as well. Like she felt like she was under threat. And she was quite upset’.<sup>142</sup>

Demand and threat are **also enacted by explicitly using paramilitarism**. For example, partners would place a woman in breach of paramilitary–community norms, and thereby at risk, by purposely sully her reputation or falsely accusing her of drug dealing (in a context where the local paramilitary group control drug dealing in that territory).<sup>143</sup> Tactics also involve **the instrumental use of weapons**, where the coercer lets the target know that they have access to weapons, which furthers the credibility of a paramilitary-related threat. One victim–survivor explained:

*... he went up to the attic and [got] a black rucksack and held up this gun. And I was panicking ... the control just intensified there. But there was a one-off incident ... where he took me and smashed my car, pulled my rear view mirrors off and my glove compartment off. Put me in a headlock, wrestled me phone off me, I had marks all over my hands ... He took me up a back lane and told me to sit there, because he was going off to get this gun. Because he was going to shoot me in the legs. And the fear of that, like, I actually nearly wet myself, I was absolutely terrified. And all this was because I was wearing makeup.*<sup>144</sup>

And another:

*... he came running into the house and up the stairs. And I was like, what the hell is he doing ... and I went up the stairs and I looked ... and he had like the gun sitting [there] ... He just left it sitting in the middle of the bedroom floor.*<sup>145</sup>

This victim–survivor told him to get rid of it,

and she was in turn given the ‘choice’ about ‘telling anybody’ because if she did, ‘you’re going to cause trouble you know’.<sup>146</sup> For this victim–survivor ‘to leave it in plain sight, that’s a threat’.<sup>147</sup> For another, ‘knives would be sharpened and polished, you know in front of her, and she would get a narrative of how they were used, and what they could be used to do to her should she tell what was going on’.<sup>148</sup>

Demands are enabled by deliberately implicating her in paramilitarism. As one woman said: ‘they’re trying to get us involved ... like, if I’m going down, you’re going down with me sort of thing’.<sup>149</sup> As a result, inter-dependence is generated, allowing him to use the ‘or else’ tactical ploy if she does not comply with his demands. This has critical implications when attempting to leave a relationship:

*She was so fearful because of things he had told her during their relationship. He had told her so many things that he had done, and what he was involved in. He didn’t directly threaten her that someone would come and get her, the fear was there based on the links she knew he had ... he had made threats to set the house on fire. So you know, it was a real fear that she said “I know it would happen, I know he will not do the dirty work. He’ll get someone else to do it.” And he knows what he’s doing ... he knows by planting that seed now if anything goes wrong, she’s going to be in fear.*<sup>150</sup>

**The ending of a relationship prompts demands** that the relationship be reinstated and/or that the victim–survivor continue complying with his paramilitarism:

*... when we split up he would have said things like you know “if you ever open your mouth or if you ever come against me you’ll get a bullet to your head” ... that active threat on me as well.*<sup>151</sup>

One victim–survivor spoke of a friend who was too afraid to participate in this research, but



who lived under threat and fear of her partner and his paramilitary involvement:

*... there's thousands of pounds in her name, because he had a gambling problem. But he would've used the IRA ... Because he said to her that he'll make sure that she has no job, no house, no car. He'll break her jaw if she ever said anything that went on within that organisation ... I have my wains, so I wasn't available at the click of the fingers to get up and go and do this that and the other. Where she didn't, and she was maybe driving places and stuff like that there ... [and when she left] she got more threats like I'll break your jaw, I'll burn your car, I'll burn your house and you'll lose your job and stuff like that.<sup>152</sup>*

**Group-based explicit threat** is invoked in some cases. In one, a woman was arrested several times and held for questioning by the PSNI because of her partner's paramilitary links. His threat of paramilitary reprisal if she spoke to the police was compounded when her family were 'visited' by the paramilitary group itself. 'There was like a big black jeep that landed at my parents' house, paramilitaries ... "it's very important you get your daughter to ring us, because she needs to come to a meeting with us".<sup>153</sup>

For another woman, group-based demands involved threats of displacement.<sup>154</sup> The involvement of third parties 'raised the bar for me. When he mentioned that, and with him turning up with the paramilitary gear on, I near had a heart attack, I thought oh my god, what did I bring to my doorstep?'<sup>155</sup> Box 2 summarises this woman's experience, including sexual assault as part of tactical group-based threat in the context of her relationship.



## Box 2: Demand, Threat and Sexual Harm: Paramilitarism as a Tactic of Fear and Control

The account below evidences the individual-to-paramilitary group-based coercive control.<sup>156</sup> This victim-survivor became involved with a man following grooming patterns of gifting; of letting her know that he knew her name and where she lived to evidence his romantic interest; and then told her a story of 'victimhood' and requested her involvement and support. He coerced himself into her home after they met and 'he started over-complimenting me and then we did end up having consensual sex – which I regret now'.

*'It turns out that the mother of his children is linked into [loyalist group] ... He gave me the impression he is into it too. And I said that 'I don't want to be part of it at all'.*

*He introduced her to his children very soon after meeting, all of which set off red flags for her.*

*She began distancing herself from him. 'I didn't want to see him. He kept on ringing me. He said he had fallen in love with me and I told him that I don't feel the same way about [him]'.*

*'Next thing, he arrived my door one night in the middle of the night, at 4am with paramilitary gear on, and with a balaclava on, banging on my door to let him in. And I was terrified, and then I heard this evil laugh, he was laughing ... it's just me, let me in, come on'.*

*'He understood then that he had already scared me. He wanted to see how far he could push me when he was talking about paramilitaries'.*

*'In the second week he barged into my house'. When she refused to be involved with him, he brought up paramilitaries again: "you know in which circles I am" and then I said: "I am supposed to be scared of your group, is that it, what are you going to do to me then?" He then said: "Just be careful with these boys, you never know what happens to you".*

*'He raped me and he physically abused me. And because he did that, he said "now you can see what we are capable of" '.*

*'He falsely accused me of so many things. He took my son's phone number and started abusing him. He kept asking me "why won't you introduce your children to me?"'*

*'I told him, "I am going to the police". He took the phone off of me and said, "if you do go to the police then it'll be stiches for snitches" and he drew a finger across the throat'.*

*'I didn't immediately rush for a rape kit – but it's because he said that to me, and he is inside my head, and I'm walking around here thinking did I dream it, did that really happen. And then I started finding the wrappers – and I know what these are, these are illegal prescription drugs. And then I found wrappers in the drawer of the table next to my bed. The dosage, for my height and weight, that would have knocked me out'.*

*'I found Tramadol. As an epileptic, I cannot take that drug. And then I had seizures and he had to call an ambulance – and fair play to the guy in the ambulance, he asked me do I want*

*this guy with me – and I was able to just tell him with my eyes, “no”. So I went in the ambulance. And then he kept on calling the hospital, asking what’s happening now. I told him that they are testing me now for any other drugs – and he got there in a jiffy. He had a taxi ordered and he had me out of there into that taxi, he couldn’t have my blood tested’.*

*‘He took me home and he kept watching over me. He kept me there. I couldn’t go anywhere. I couldn’t go to the toilet alone, I couldn’t talk to my neighbour. He kept a hawk eye on me. I couldn’t phone anyone, any of my friends, I couldn’t ask my neighbour for help’.*

*‘I found that the mental abuse was most difficult to handle. The things he said to me, especially after he raped me. He kept saying “you enjoyed it”’.*

*Then the phone calls, and silence on the end of the phone calls – it went on and on and on. ‘He dismantled my alarm systems. I was more or less a sitting duck here’.*

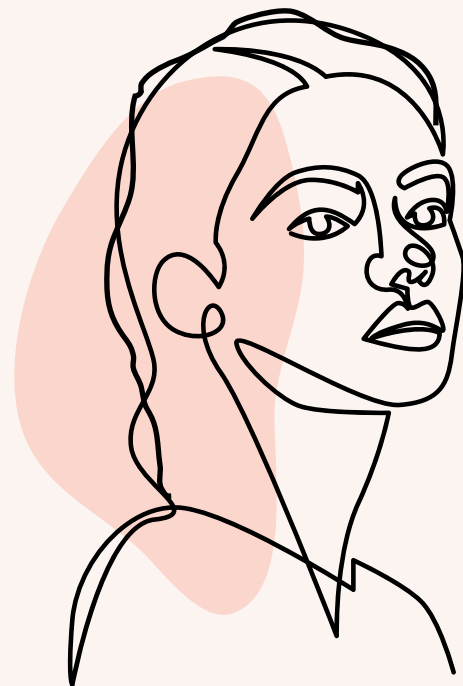
*‘He criminally damaged my whole property. He wrecked my home. With the help of a neighbour of mine, I eventually got him out. My friends helped me rebuild things, my dresser he destroyed and burnt – and I got rid of the mattress cos I did not want reminder of him ... so that there is nothing of him here anymore’.*

*‘I think he is using [paramilitarism] ... to intimidate me ... he spiked me and raped me and physically assaulted me, but I think that in this current situation with the non-molestation order, he won’t do*

*anything now, because of the cameras, panic buttons and everything [that she had installed]. Touch wood he won’t do anything’.*

*‘Now there is a harassment case against me. He uses certain text messages. You know, I got angry with him. My messages were taken out of context and now he is charging me with harassment’.*

*‘It’s a very difficult thing – when you do go to the police with this ... I think it is really very important that they [police] do listen to the women, that it [paramilitarism] is an extra fear that they put onto the women. It is just more fear’.*



The **tactic of forced displacement** is also used. One woman who lived in a loyalist community began a relationship with a man with IRA involvement. He approached loyalist paramilitaries for permission to enter her neighbourhood to ensure his own safety. The consequence of that was on her:

*I had threats in my home that I was going to be put out, to me directly. Which he didn't do anything about ... I was left to deal with all that myself ... he knew that it would've caused me difficulty. And it did, and there was threats that my house was going to be burnt, and my windows were going to be put through. And I said to him about it and he just left me to fend for myself.<sup>157</sup>*

Women, and their children where relevant, have to move their lives and stay with family or friends during periods of threat and surveillance in order to feel safe, and/or have to move house permanently.<sup>158</sup> Such is the power of paramilitary threat that for many service providers, 'the best advice we can give [is that] you now have to manage the risk, you have to move'.<sup>159</sup>

There is significant loss involved for women. The loss of a safe space, of the *home* that has been carefully cultivated by women for them and their children, the loss and destruction of material possessions and the loss of a place and belonging in their wider community.

### **Gendered physical and sexual harm was a feature of all of these women's relationships.**

It is an instrument that makes coercive threats credible, and a foretelling of what it could escalate towards for non-compliance with demands. Further, they are 'distinctive harms ... inherent to the coercion, a form of punishment and sanction that are inherent to coercive harm'.<sup>160</sup> For one respondent, a series of alleged misdemeanours led to psychological abuse:

*I couldn't even go to my mum's even for a half an hour, I had to take the kids with me. And then he would be phoning me saying to me "oh you've left your kids off at your mum's. You're nothing but a dirty tramp", this that and all the rest of it. And me up in my mum's house.<sup>161</sup>*

And, for her, there was a linkage between the paramilitarism brought into her home and the ongoing abuse:

*He had left, in my shed ... a pipe bomb, with me and the two kids in the house ... he was quite dangerous. One night we were out and he knocked me out and I ended up with seven staples in my eyebrow. Then he used to go out every weekend drinking. And he used to come home and he used to start, he used to say to my kids like "oh your mum's nothing but a XXX". Then he would lift his dinner and throw it up around the walls. He would smash the TV ... at one stage he just lifted my head and just banged it off the wall. And I had his footprints on all my ribs. That went on nearly every weekend with him.<sup>162</sup>*

The violence was directed towards the potential delivery of the threat: 'I always thought that he was going to kill me anyway in my head ... he said it many times. And he had his hands around my throat many times.'<sup>163</sup> Wider research on paramilitarism points to the presence of significant sexual exploitation and abuse by paramilitarism as part of wider control of communities.<sup>164</sup>

For another woman, the abuse 'was all very psychological, there was no physical abuse with him, it was all very mental and psychological'.<sup>165</sup> However, for her 'that was the worst relationship I've ever been in'. And significantly, 'the physical stuff is easier proved than the stuff in the background'. He would tell her 'that's all in your head ... I've never once said I've paramilitary involvement. You are off your head, you run with things, this is what you do ... and put me now as a paramilitary'. For her, this all made it 'hard to get out of as well, you know couldn't have been more alone and feeling that you can't leave him ... as I say there was no physical with me, but that was the worst relationship I've ever been in'.<sup>166</sup>

### **(iv) Surveillance**

Surveillance is a critical strategy in sustaining the power of the demand and threat.<sup>167</sup> A common feature of IPV, and also evident in the

IPV found in this research, is that the coercive partner monitors the target's whereabouts, phone, workplace, emails, etc. For example,

*I changed my number seven times and every time he got it ... [then] it would've been private phone calls and stuff like that ... this was after we finished ... "It's getting dark quite early out there, you watch yourself".<sup>168</sup>*

On top of the individual tactics, paramilitary conventions used in the demand, threat and harm outlined before are transitioned into the surveillance stage as **group-based surveillance**. Group-based tactics of surveillance draw from the *chronic implicit presence* of paramilitarism at community levels. For victim-survivors, coercive control in their relationships now involves a much wider berth of surveillance than that typical of one partner in the context of IPV.

Women's current and former partners used the material resources of paramilitarism for surveillance. For example, for one woman, 'it's been like that ... from the day I met him, there's been about thirty to forty different cars ... it's not just him changing them, it's the whole organisation. They constantly change the cars.'<sup>169</sup> This generates

*... a really bad feeling, sitting in your stomach or something. Like, you're just going to be sick, you're sitting on edge ... because he's constantly in different cars ... And he knows now that I know that he has a black XXX. But he's now driving around in two different cars.<sup>170</sup>*

The networks of paramilitarism are also used. '[E]ven taxi men ... they help organisations. So you can get in a taxi, you could be watched and everything relayed back to him.'<sup>171</sup> And 'he [the partner] would text ... "oh you were wearing a black dress today" ... I caught on after a couple of times, that it only happens whenever the grass cutters were [out in her estate]. And I knew [then] that he knew somebody in that'.<sup>172</sup> The resources of paramilitary-related surveillance are significant. Service sector workers who support women leaving paramilitary-related relationships have observed:

*It's when they break away ... with any ordinary situation of domestic violence, they are more vulnerable ... however, within literally hours, and I would sometimes even say minutes, they are found, wherever they go to.<sup>173</sup>*

One services sector worker described a client they had worked with:

*I remember her describing it was like layers of people. [And] they had different roles, so, there was the ones who watched her, and surveyed her. And then there was the names that were given to her, and she would be introduced to these supposed people, as the ones who would be doing any dirty deeds that he wanted. You know, so at his say, they would be available to kneecap her or shoot her or cut her breast off.<sup>174</sup>*

The above is a significant indicator of the degree to which paramilitary convention is used to enable a specific type of networked surveillance. See Box 3 for the full experience of that particular victim-survivor.

The surveillance is effective. For one woman, 'it came to the stage where I wouldn't leave my home ... then with me thinking, "maybe it is all in my head?" And then I actually got to the stage then where I says to myself, he's actually going to kill me ... He's going to walk away and be able to carry on'.<sup>175</sup> And for another woman, 'I still don't feel like I am fully out ... He still tries to control aspects of my life ... I don't really go out ... [and] I've got to that point now where I'm like, two fingers up, and I'm going to go out ... And the two times I've came across him, and ... there's been an altercation'.<sup>176</sup>

The control extends to preventing women from moving on. For one woman, 'if I get into a relationship with somebody, he'll have them threatened and pull them into a back of a van' and because 'he's known around the city', his paramilitarism and threatening behaviour means that 'everybody's a wee bit wary to come near me. Because of him, because of what he done and stuff like that'.<sup>177</sup>

### Box 3: Coercive Paramilitary-based Surveillance

A service sector worker summarises the experience of a client subject to paramilitary-related surveillance to enforce control of her:<sup>234</sup>

*As well as the domestic violence which was horrific ... physical, sexual, emotional and psychological, she was also abused by the threat of what would happen to her should she speak out. Her husband and his family were very high up, she called it, in paramilitary activity, and he often would show her texts or send her texts of the people that were watching her. So, her every day was being monitored when she was with him. He even told her that the doorbell, you know camera and everything was watching her, and hooked up to the organisation ... to the point where she literally felt that she was under surveillance 24/7... even at work she felt also that she was under surveillance.*

*She got breast cancer and ... a mastectomy ... he would not go to collect her after the surgery from Belfast. While she was on [various public transport] she was getting constant texts and calls from him, that there was at least three men on the bus from his team that were watching her. [And he told her] well there's no point in coming here with one tit, you may as well have none. So I'll get one of the boys on the bus to blow the other one off you, with a handgun. She was lying in bed the night that she went home ... he got a marker, and*

*he started drawing out on the other side of her chest where he was going to be slicing off or getting someone to slice off her other breast, because she now wasn't a proper woman. And that he would get the boys to do this. He couldn't tell her whether or not he would leave her to bleed to death or if she was allowed to get medical attention. But it would be medical attention from the boys.*

*He was so convincing, and so manipulative, that she believed everything that he said. You know, the woman lived in complete and utter terror ... she constantly felt is he going to get me killed today.*

*[After she left] ... she changed her phone number so many times, but he was able to get it every time. And then the texts would come ... he would name the people that were watching her, and that they knew [where she was] ... it was only a matter of time before her knees would be done and then her head would be shot. It was just constant ... I supported her to do a police report. Nothing ever came of it ... She got a text from him to say, "that won't work".*

*She went down a path of self-destruction. She was found at the bottom of her stairs with a bottle of vodka, and she had taken a lot of tablets. He took full control of her funeral. It was closed, nobody was allowed to go ... so even in death he still had control.*

## (v) Response to Paramilitary-related Coercive Control: Compliance and Resistance

Victim-survivors will respond in varied ways to demands, harm and controls. In addition, this research found that response services also respond in varied ways and, in some cases, they become a cog within the control patterns of paramilitarisms. The Framework captures responses to coercion by the target (victim-survivors) and also by response services.

### *Response to Coercion by Victim-Survivors*

In line with IPV patterns, this research found that women's responses to coercion involve compliance or, in some cases, complying until the point where resistance through escape is safely possible.<sup>178</sup> **Complying** has consequences. It **means a life lived in fear and control** and living with cycles of physical, sexual, financial and psychological abuse, **as well as being forced to partake in or enable their partner's paramilitarism**. Women become **a cog in the control factors that make up paramilitary convention**.

Many women try to *feel* and *stay* safe, and to manage the level of surveillance they are under. It costs money which they do not have and they often have to fund it themselves. Like this woman's experience:

*I had to order three cameras. A false one for the balcony. He came over the roof onto the balcony one time, and the camera was inside that points to the front door ... it was close to £2000 ... I had to ask my son to help me pay towards it, [he said] "don't worry mummy I'll transfer the money and you just make sure you are safe".<sup>179</sup>*

Frustration was expressed with some related aspects of police response.

*They said after I put in my cameras ... "oh you are really protected here now". I said, "do you know how quickly he comes through [the] window, I am not protected, you can have something on CCTV, but if they want me dead, they want me dead".<sup>180</sup>*

Reporting requires significant safety planning. Women who report are dealing not just with potential harm from a partner for not complying but also *from paramilitaries*, and/or ostracisation from their community. **Their ability to report IPV is directly impacted by the abusers' paramilitary-related status**. Box 4 outlines more on the gravity of paramilitary-related barriers.

When one respondent was asked: Does the fact that he was in the paramilitaries make a difference to how you respond?, she stated: 'Oh massively, it felt like you had no voice and you'd nowhere to turn to. Because I just felt really cornered ... the only people I could've confided in was my mother and my sister'.<sup>181</sup>

According to service providers, it is always the 'assumption that if she contacts the police then she is a tout'.<sup>182</sup> Women 'are afraid to report [to police] in case there's retaliation from certain groups within the community'.<sup>183</sup> The retaliation could be 'as simple as a knock on the door and a word of warning, or it could escalate right up ... arson, your car being set on fire close to your property. You know, it does have a real impact on whether someone reports it or not'.<sup>184</sup> The PSNI observe women profusely stating 'I'm not a tout ... That's their words. They don't want the protection or the help of the police ... They believe it would end up much worse for them'.<sup>185</sup> Women in these situations 'are just in so much fear ...'<sup>186</sup> and believe that 'they (paramilitaries) will know the minute that [the police] have arrived at the door ... and they feel more unsafe because of that than they would actually getting a beating from him'.<sup>187</sup>

#### Box 4: Paramilitary-related Barriers to Reporting

A service provider describes the specific barriers to reporting as a result of the presence of paramilitarism within a relationship :

*'We talk about ordinary clients of domestic abuse ... there are so many barriers that they have to overcome. But a woman who is in an abusive relationship where there's the added layer of paramilitary as well, that's additional barriers that she will never ever be able to break through. It's like a glass ceiling isn't it? Because she's not one of them, she never will be one of them. And she will never break through that glass ceiling to become a member of this organised group ... she could never see herself being able to battle her way out to freedom. Freedom without abuse from him as the perpetrator. But [also] the additional abuse of all these other people that were associated with him, the ones who followed her, the ones who were identified to her as being potential you know killers, murderers who would harm her, make her disappear ... How women are even expected to be able to get themselves out of that, it doesn't bear thinking about. They will never, I don't think, ever be free while these men are roaming and allowed to have the control that they do in our society'.<sup>235</sup>*

#### Tacit and Tactical Coercion by Response Services

Coercion within response services finds expression in two ways. **First, is the tacit coercion of services by the implicit and chronic presence of paramilitarism.** Services are designed and delivered within the same broader coercive environment that paramilitary controls arise from. That inevitably influences how they are delivered, as well as women's experiences when they do approach them.

Some of the service workers interviewed for this research expressed fear at being associated with it, and fear of dealing with paramilitarism in the lives of women that they support. For one, 'we had a client, and it was her son was the person involved with the paramilitaries ... he came to [our premises] and threatened to kill her'.<sup>188</sup> Others expressed frustration at being unable to fully support women caught in paramilitary-influenced relationships. For the PSNI, as well as broader support services, it remains a reality that entering communities controlled by paramilitaries presents a risk to their own safety. When providing follow-up support, one service sector worker had her car tyres slashed after visiting a client,<sup>189</sup> for another:

*You're a strange car in a certain area and I'm just going in as a support worker. There is that feeling of fear ... because you just don't know what could possibly happen. And that sounds ridiculous. And then that's impacting on our support that we can give to women ... [It] is very intimidating, whenever you're going into an estate and it's full of flags.<sup>190</sup>*



For policing, challenges carry over from the Troubles, including the need to go into some communities ‘in Land Rovers’. In one case, ‘whilst they were in dealing with her, they were getting pelted with bottles [and] under attack from the locals ... And this was serious abuse ... he bit part of her nose off ... But police don’t like being seen using the Land Rovers, unless it’s really necessary’.<sup>191</sup>

Support services can, in some instances, become ineffective in the face of paramilitary-related controls. ‘[N]ormally ... women come into our accommodation and we can be look this [and] this ... This I can’t sort. I don’t know how to sort *this*. I don’t know how to do *this*. And for a support worker who is used to sorting out things for women, like what?’<sup>192</sup> There is a feeling on their part that, ‘you know in essence [we are] a powerful organisation ... and you have so much brilliant services to give to these women ... but then it stops dead with paramilitarism, when you meet the paramilitarism’.<sup>193</sup>

In common with IPV cases, and with the added element of paramilitarism, perpetrators also instrumentalise services for their own coercive means. For example, if a victim–survivor reports and social services get involved and ‘if his contact is stopped because of the people that he’s associating with, or if there’s a threat on his property and his contact is stopped’, he blames her and accuses her of touting.<sup>194</sup> For another victim–survivor, it was being ‘dragged’ through the courts, ‘it’s financial abuse ... he’s on [legal assistance] and stuff, so he doesn’t have to pay financially for the courts’.<sup>195</sup>

Given the degree to which forced displacement and burning of homes is a tactic of paramilitarism, so too resources, such as housing, become **a tacit part of broader coercive control**. For example, significant effort is made by the housing executive to respond to those who are issued paramilitary (and other forms of) intimidation and threat and need alternate housing, and the highest housing points are currently attributed to such risks.<sup>196</sup> That in itself creates complexities, acknowledged by the housing executive and as a result that points scheme is currently under reform.<sup>197</sup> For example, in this research

some women relayed an understanding that if a paramilitary threat against her is known, then the housing executive will not give her a house, because of risk it will be burnt down.<sup>198</sup> This means she cannot leave the violent relationship. While this was refuted by housing services as not actually true, it is the case that stories such as this are used as the basis for threat, to coerce women into staying put, or making them leave homes that they could otherwise stay in. Paramilitary control is also the basis for exploitation of the system to the point where ‘the system is paralysed around paramilitary threat’.<sup>199</sup>

It is argued and evidenced that ‘the vast majority of people that have paramilitary threats are men’.<sup>200</sup> This is significant and signals the need for greater gendered and age-responsive understanding of men and boy’s experiences of formal threat, intimidation and control by paramilitaries.

A gendered lens, and the findings of this research however, also evidences that there are further and significant nuances to the assumption that men experience paramilitary-related threat on a greater scale than women. The understanding of the ‘true reality’ of paramilitarism sought by the IRC<sup>201</sup> very much depends on a gendered assessment of how ‘threat’ is categorised and understood by policy makers, and also by women and communities.

There is long-standing legal and policy frames for defining threats to the person (including paramilitary threat), for validating such threats, as well as designating threats for policy and criminal response.<sup>202</sup> These frames determine policing as well as broader policy response, such as in housing, and are generally based on legislation.<sup>203</sup> While these are the baseline for assessing threat, it is also the case that they present quite specific parameters and categories to what might constitute ‘threat’.

This matters in terms of whether women’s specific experiences of threat can be made visible and responded to. Women, for example, experience multiple kinds of threats – including to life, to well-being, to physical and sexual security, to their children and to their homes. These often emerge through different avenues than those captured in law and policy that



constitute formal 'threat' i.e. they may emerge *within women's intimate relationships* and in some cases also invoke, on an informal basis, *the chronic tacit controls and threat related to paramilitarism* (described throughout this report). These threats might not *look like* or reach the threshold of formal 'paramilitary threat' designated in some formal policy approaches. However, threat within the context of both IPV and the partner's paramilitary links may, in actuality, be life threatening and importantly, *for women, will be understood as a threat to their life and wellbeing*. Even so it is understood that:

*... a woman who is a victim of domestic violence will never ever get the two hundred paramilitary points. Because it only applies to a paramilitary threat ... The vast majority of people and in this case women who apply to us are victims of domestic violence, they get the seventy points.*<sup>204</sup>

Many women thereby cannot, or feel that they cannot, report *the kinds of paramilitary threats that they experience* because they differ from the typical *mode or way* that men experience threats – such as those formally issued and verified through the PSNI, through a letterbox or a formal punishment warning through a community organisation. Rather, paramilitary threats *in the context of women's intimate relationships* are invisibilised because they do not conform to the kinds of social-control threats that men typically experience as a result of paramilitary public-sphere activities.

Further, women's experiences of threat are often, as described before, dismissed as irrational fear and are relegated to 'private' aspects of IPV. Women's cumulative experiences of sexualised assault, strangulation, group-based harm and surveillance make it highly unlikely they will feel safe reporting threats to policy services, nor have the 'proof' needed to demonstrate that this looks like other formal threats.

**Attempting to compare or suggest symmetries between men's and women's experiences of paramilitary threat misrepresents the**

**gendered ways that paramilitarisms are experienced and paramilitary threats are delivered.** Gender-responsive services are critical as life-saving measures for women living in a 'true reality' of combined domestic and paramilitary-related terrorisms within the home.

Housing Rights has already recognised the need for policy that responds to 'domestic abuse, victims of modern slavery and human trafficking' among other sources of threat.<sup>205</sup> This is a progressive move. A fully gender-responsive housing policy and housing scheme will account for differences in experiences of threat across different genders and that emerge as a result of the different ways that gender norms and inequalities are experienced.

In addition, it is consistently the case across multiple jurisdictions that women and children are expected to leave the family home, to take responsibility for being safe. While there is a turn towards services recognising that it is the violent men who should be made leave,<sup>206</sup> this is complicated where paramilitarism is involved and where paramilitarism = community, and where women belong to the group, rather than themselves constituting community. These intricacies require further understanding as to the true nature of insidious paramilitary coercive control in women's lives.

**The second aspect** of responses by services **is tactical explicit coercion used by some service providers.** While those interviewed largely praised the services they used, others experienced demands and threats with characteristics similar to the tactical coercion they were escaping from. Many spoke highly about the Public Protection Unit of the PSNI, and the care that they received from those officers.

In some cases, it was a completely different experience, particularly where other aspects of policing become involved. Following the break-up of one woman's relationship, her ex-partner was later arrested. Her home was then raided by the police and she was arrested. Following

police presence at her home, her ex-partner was threatening towards her, and her family were then approached and intimidated by a paramilitary group (noted before). She stated that at one point: 'I just broke down I said, I can't take this anymore, I literally can't take this. I'm getting threats from both sides from the MI5 and paramilitaries, I just don't know what to do.'<sup>207</sup> She described the police actions as the worst part of the abuse she experienced related to that relationship: 'I felt like a criminal, they made me feel I was a criminal and I was going to do time.'<sup>208</sup> A fuller account of her experience is in Box 5.

For one victim-survivor '[o]nce I mentioned [it], they [the police] were more interested in getting the gun than they were the domestic violence'.<sup>209</sup> For another, because her family had historical involvement in paramilitarism, 'she felt she was now being penalised for it'<sup>210</sup> and the police were not taking the violence seriously. She experienced a stop and search at one point 'and I was put in the back of a Land Rover ... the police officer, he looked me up and down, he was all "I would love to search you, but I can't"'.<sup>211</sup>

For many police officers, 'if we are dealing with a victim they are dealt with as a victim'<sup>212</sup> and 'no victim should ever be pursued or threatened by the police service investigating against them'.<sup>213</sup> It is the case however that different units of policing may approach women in dangerous situations of IPV in ways that exacerbate the threat she lives with and not take the woman's own understanding of the paramilitary threat seriously.



## Box 5: A 'Sitting Duck': Stuck Between the Coercive Power of Policing and of Paramilitarism

For this victim-survivor, while 'there was something ... it's not something that I would have questioned further because at the end of the day, I didn't really want to know. I didn't want part of it.' After she ended the relationship, 'I think it was more a bravado thing ... he shared some of "what he was involved in" '. One day 'he came down and there was a car with him, he said "I have to put something in your shed" ... And I was like "no you are definitely not", I said "look. I am not afraid of you and who you are, I have no problem ringing the police"'. Later she found out that 'they did go and put something in that shed ... So he actively put both myself and my two children at risk by what he put in that shed'.

After his arrest, her house was raided by police. She was arrested and taken for questioning ... 'there was a lot of underlying threats there ... threats to my children and ... I thought this is it, I'm never going to see my wains again. I'm going to do time, Jesus it was horrendous. And I just, I couldn't stop shaking, obviously my body just couldn't stop shaking'.

*'And then I was signing bail for a while like some scumbag ... Whereas they didn't have enough information on him, he got just to walk around scot-free, and I was the one signing bail, and he wasn't'.*

*'I was being abused by my [ex-partner] and ... he threatened me again ... He said, "you can't open your fuckin' mouth what's going to happen you, you can't open your mouth". I knew nothing anyway'.*

*'But then they [police] came for me again ... I was just getting the children ready for school ... And the knock on the door, and even now to this day when I hear a big knock on the door, big vans pulling up my heart still sinks, it's just horrendous. Just the trauma of that just doesn't leave you like ... I was so annoyed because the children were there this time. And I opened the door... "we are arresting you under"... I started crying and I said, "not in front of my wains"'.  
  
*Then, 'there was like a big black jeep that landed at my parents' house ... My daddy just acted stupid ... He knew straight away who they were. And they left a number ... I was on the verge of a mental breakdown ... I'm in the middle of being arrested, and the house raided, and now have these boys looking for me as well. They sent out a card to say they wanted to speak to me ... So, I thought this threat is out on me ... if I go to that meeting I'll probably not walk back out of it again'.**

*'I was kind of stuck in the middle, stuck between a rock and a hard place. I had the MI5 coming down telling me if I don't talk about this guy I'm going to prison and I'm going to lose my children. And then, I had the paramilitaries on the other side, you know, "you open your mouth and you are going in an early grave"'.  
  
*'I was being abused by my [ex-partner] and ... he threatened me again ... He said, "you can't open your fuckin' mouth what's going to happen you, you can't open your mouth". I knew nothing anyway'.**

The paramilitaries called her and she asked 'why you are ringing me and why [do] you need this meeting? He goes "oh ... it came from [ex-partner], we have been told that you have a lot of information about the IRA and you are going around mouthing about it. And you were sitting in a bar drunk talking about it". I said "do you honestly think after everything ... I'd be sitting in some bar talking?" My temper went at that point ... I hung up the phone'. He 'used the paramilitaries against me' and 'he's now using my daughter ... making up stories, phoning social services, having them out to my house ... he really is a horrible human being'. As for the police: '... it was about breaking me down and using the threat of prison ... of losing my children ... they even called to my house a couple of times after that ... guys in suits ... And I just had to keep slamming the door, they had no reason to come into my house then, so I just didn't listen to them, The continued threats ... we are still watching you like'.

## (vi) Impacts of Coercion and Control

The impacts and outcomes of living with IPV and paramilitary-related coercive control are numerous. Victim-survivors described mental illness, stress and anxiety; drug and alcohol addiction; physical ill-health; psychological effects on children; suicidal ideation; displacement from the home and isolation from community and family. For one woman: 'I have post-traumatic stress disorder ... You just don't go through that and just get up and okay, that's all done, then move on from it'.<sup>214</sup> Another was 'diagnosed with PTSD ... and I used to feel really suicidal around Christmas time, and I hated Christmas because of him raping me at that time'.<sup>215</sup> Paramilitary involvement also affects the choices women have in how they recover: 'I had to do EMDR therapy,<sup>216</sup> where you didn't have to talk about your trauma out loud. That was the only way to deal with that, because, even with a therapist, I didn't feel safe enough to tell her "oh he raped me". Because of his involvement with the IRA. That's why I didn't feel safe'.<sup>217</sup>

Loss of the home is significant, but being unable to return to your community, or even visit family, is a huge loss and impact.<sup>218</sup> For some, the response to the chronic spectre of paramilitarism is hyper-vigilance with 'panic attacks in my sleep for a long time ... And as soon as I open my eyes in the morning, I was constantly looking over my shoulders ... looking out the windows ... doors locked ... checking underneath my car'.<sup>219</sup> The *implicit* presence of paramilitarism, as well as *explicit* paramilitary-related controls, adds layers of fear, harm and isolation that women live with even after leaving the relationship.

## (vii) Delivery of Threat and Harm

Acute expressions of harm and control were experienced by women who took part in this research as part of the 'delivery' of the threatened harm. Measures of how 'acute' a harm is should be determined by women themselves. For example, being asked by a neighbour or ex-partner if they have called the police might appear to some like a question, but might in fact put enough fear in women that *they experience it as the delivery of the*

*threat*, i.e. that they have been sanctioned, and need to get back in line. Even without physical harm, a loaded look or a knock on the door is enough to deliver the threat and make women comply with demands, such as not reporting to police.

The delivery of threat can also involve acute violence. One victim-survivor described how her partner 'really forced me [into] having sex with him quite a bit' and having failed to comply with coercion to have sex following the birth of their baby, he violently raped her. It was

*... two weeks after I had the wee girl, I had stitches and all after having her. And he raped me in my living room so he did, and I ended up being hospitalised .... all my stitches were torn, infected, and I had an infection in my wound ... So I had to deal with the paramilitary side of it and then have him raping me then after it, because it was my fault that this situation has happened. And I brought it all on myself and he would laugh at me about it. And said I was overreacting that it was all in my head and all.<sup>220</sup>*

Expectations of sexual entitlement and sexual control of women feature in the demand and the delivery of threat in intimate relationships, and within paramilitary convention more broadly,<sup>221</sup> as does the engagement of paramilitary members in delivery of threat.

A case shared by a service sector worker described how her client had

*...dared to go to the police about what he was doing to her, and he's well known to the police all over Northern Ireland as being in the IRA. And he literally got this man to beat her literally almost to death ... she was battered so much by his soldiers as she called them, she ended up with brain damage, she was in hospital for six months ... they turned the gas oven on, she was unconscious, and put her head in the oven ... her neighbour thank God came in and phoned the ambulance.<sup>222</sup>*

Wider so-called 'punishment' beatings, shootings and forced displacement are a spectre to the intimacies of harm happening within women's relationships. They are also a reality for those working at community levels and for wider service sector workers.



## 4. PARAMILITARY CONVENTIONALISM: GENDERED COERCIVE CONTROL OF WOMEN

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This research evidences that **women experience a layered dynamic of inter-linked demand–threat–coercion–control** from paramilitary social control of communities into one-to-one control by intimate partners.

Within that, **paramilitarisms play a dualistic role** in (some) women’s experiences of IPV.

- First, paramilitary conventions **hold an implicit presence that is tacitly used** as the basis for controls over a community, home or relationship. This is the *broader cumulative chronic control* that a group or individual coercer will draw from, to exert coercive power.
- Second, **paramilitary conventions have an explicit presence and are used in a tactical way** within a community, home or relationship. The coercer, or the wider group, use paramilitary convention as a strategic instrument, to threaten, instil fear and ultimately exert control over a woman.

**The broader social context influences and enables the above dynamics of harm and control**, including histories of political status and related violence, harmful gender norms and inequalities, and the failure to address Troubles-related gendered violence.

Paramilitary-related coercive control is characterised by **dualistic interconnected implicit (chronic) and explicit (tactical) modes that operate concurrently and reinforce one another**. This enables the social control of women’s lives, as well as of entire communities. It also positions women as a cog, an asset, within the broader wheels of control of communities. **Paramilitary conventions are both a means and a manifestation of harm**

**and control over women, their bodies, their children and their wider families**. The research also evidences that the services sector is directly affected, as is its ability to respond appropriately to women’s needs. That presents barriers to real ‘free choice’ and prevents women from fully disentangling themselves from the layered coercive environment.

It is evident that women affected by paramilitarisms live their lives within a **gendered coercive net of implicit and explicit coercion and control, depicted in Figure 3**. Women experience the following in an interconnected and entangled way:

- (i) Partner-based demand–threat–coercion and harm within the context of their relationship. This includes ‘ordinary’ IPV, as well partners’ implicit and explicit use of paramilitary convention;
- (ii) Paramilitary group-based demand–threat–coercion and harm on a collective basis. Threats include implicit and explicit use of paramilitary convention to threaten and intimidate women to remain aligned with the group’s broader social controls, for example, not reporting IPV outside of ‘the community’;
- (iii) Services impacted by coercion: The coercive environment resulting from the chronic presence of paramilitarism implicitly influences how women will experience some services, and in some cases, becomes an explicit aspect of how *some* of the services operate.



The following summarises key research findings pertinent for the delivery of policy and services that meet the needs of women living around this web of coercion:

**Women's own understanding of the meaning and significance of the threat, fear and potential for harm should determine how services understand and respond to it.** This was not always the case in the experiences shared for this research. Women understand that they are dealing not just with one abusive partner, but with a group, and services should offer support in ways that respond to the layers of control they are living in.

**Women are caught between the coercive and cooperative relationships that exist**

**between paramilitary groups across different communities.** At times, partners deliberately place them in compromised position vis-à-vis different groups. Perpetrators exploit the territorial and coercive tensions that continue to exist between different paramilitary organisations and factions. This underscores a recurrent theme in this research – that women do not 'belong' to the group or their relationships as equal members, but rather are another commodity *belonging to* men in those groups.

**Women are caught between the coercive power of paramilitarisms and that of certain elements of the police anti-terrorism response.** For the victim-survivor whose experience



was detailed in Box 5 above, she felt that 'I was being controlled by the two'.<sup>223</sup> This is not inconsequential, and is something that needs urgent attention as regards how policing approaches paramilitarisms. A key issue for women in approaching police is that they won't be believed, and in the context of paramilitarism, that the paramilitaries will harm them.<sup>224</sup> Women are caught between these two sets of fears and dynamics.

**The services that women look towards are themselves implicitly coerced by paramilitarisms and, in some cases, are coercive of women also.** The socio-political and gendered context informs what services can and cannot do in terms of their reach

and impact. There is a perception that police are using women and there 'needs to be much more understanding, it's not her responsibility, she's not in an organisation, but for them to understand the coercive threat she is in and that they can make it worse for her – police don't care about her'.<sup>225</sup> Further, political neutrality of community and service sector organisations matters, as otherwise victim-survivors see those organisations as compromised and no longer feel they can approach them for support.<sup>226</sup>



## 5. CONCLUSION

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This research has identified the characteristics and operative mechanisms of ‘paramilitary-related coercive control’ impacting women who are victim–survivors of IPV. The research evidences that it is only with a gendered lens that the issue and its impact on everyone can be fully understood, and it is only when women’s lives are free of coercive control that a comprehensive *lived experience* of peace in Northern Ireland can be achieved.

**The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control** evidences the enabling social context and maps how paramilitary conventions become operationally effective in controlling women, and ostensibly, their families and communities.

Women as well as service providers pointed repeatedly to the ‘fear that’s holding [women] in there around the terrorists’.<sup>227</sup> It was estimated that ‘we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg ... it’s only going to get worse ... even more women [will be] coming through, hopefully, for women to see light and be able to reach out and get the support’.<sup>228</sup> It is clear that if paramilitary conventions are debunked and loosened, and as intolerance of paramilitarism grows, so too will reporting of coercive control of all kinds.<sup>229</sup> More women may come forward, and services tailored to their experiences will be needed. Service providers need to be supported to be ready with appropriate responses to both encourage women to come forward and to appropriately support them when they do.

However, isolating support at the level of the relationship is not enough. It is not just the incidence of harm or the pattern of abuse within a relationship that needs tackling. As mapped in the Framework, a holistic approach is needed that:

- Tackles the enabling socio-political and gendered context of paramilitary and gendered social controls and
- Unpacks and addresses the steps of coercion that sustain the coercive power of paramilitarisms.

A number of recommendations arise from the research:

1. **A joined-up multi-agency response to paramilitary-related coercive control is needed.** The Foyle Family Justice Centre<sup>230</sup> is a space where agencies can jointly work together and ensure cooperative approaches are taken. A common understanding of and approach to how paramilitary-related coercive control affects victims of abuse should be developed and should be based on a gendered understanding of contemporary paramilitarisms. That common approach should form a central basis of joined-up approaches.
2. **The political, policy and services sectors should develop protocols that specifically support women attempting to navigate and exit from a ‘group-based’ reality of coercive control.** Protocols and support measures should be trauma-informed, include safety planning that responds to group-based networks of surveillance and control and that support women who are entrapped by the intricacies of individual-to-group based layers of control. Approaches to group-based coercive control should be informed and led by women’s own understanding of their realities and on their terms.
3. **The political, policy and services sectors need to ensure that gendered analysis informs understanding of and response to women’s experiences of violence generally, and particularly their experiences of paramilitarisms.** Policy, programming and services need to respond to the layered dynamics of coercive control from the community into the home.
4. **The definition and understanding of paramilitary threat, and of threat generally, used by policy and the services sector needs to be informed by a gendered understanding of ‘threat’ and the kinds of threat that women specifically experience.** In particular, police and housing responses need to take into account the reality of

the context in which women experience threat (e.g. in the home). Women's own understanding of *feeling under threat* should be taken seriously and form part of how policy responses are made.

5. **The political, policy and services sectors should be informed by better understanding of women and girls' lived experience of paramilitary-related sexualised violence and exploitation taking place (affecting all genders)** at the broader community level, as well as at intimate levels. Appropriate responses that are victim-survivor-led and -informed should be developed through multi-agency approaches.
6. **Service-providing organisations, including policing, need to provide support to women, and engage with them primarily as victim-survivors of intimate partner violence.** The paramilitary-related elements of their relationship and abuse need to be taken seriously, on their terms, but not become the primary interest in the ways that support is provided.
7. **All police units, regardless of their specific role, should be trained on how paramilitary-related broader social controls are gendered and are co-opted into intimate relationships.** That understanding should be brought into policy and operative responses to women's experiences of IPV, particularly in communities where paramilitarisms are present. The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control could be used as a training tool for policing and other policy organisations.
8. **The experiences that women have shared in this report should be used to evolve a gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding within macro political processes, as well as within programming that tackles paramilitarism.** There is significant work led by women's organisations at community levels supporting women living in paramilitary controlled communities.<sup>231</sup> Political and policy processes need to listen to women's voices and ensure that actions are taken in response to what women have clearly

articulated are their key priorities, interests and needs.

9. **The Framework of Paramilitary-related Coercive Control should be used to advance better understanding of conflict-related coercive control within Northern Ireland, and beyond.** Further research in other geographical areas of Northern Ireland is needed to develop specific understanding of local nuances of paramilitary-related conventions and controls and to develop tailored policy and programming responses. **The framework should also be retrospectively applied to examine Troubles-related gendered violence to enhance better understanding of women's experiences of harm during the Troubles.** The evidence generated should be used to advance efforts to address the gap in accountability for women's experiences of Troubles-related gendered violence.
10. **This research on conflict-related coercive control in Northern Ireland should be used to inform and expand global policy dialogue and debate on women's experiences of gendered harm related to conflict.** The framework could also be adapted to and used in other conflict-affected sites globally to make visible and deepen understanding of gendered conflict-related coercive control by non-state actors.

# ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

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## Scope and Focus of the Research

The study focuses on ‘paramilitary-related coercive control’ affecting women across all communities. The study evolved as a result of conversations between the author and Foyle Women’s Aid Director, Marie Brown, drawing from their respective bodies of research (Aisling Swaine) and decades of work on violence against women in the region (Marie Brown). It evolved as an idea and specific piece of research over a four year period, culminating in this report.

## Methodology

The research began with consultations and a focus group discussion with Foyle Women’s Aid team members and clients (in 2020) to scope the viability of the topic for research.

This was followed by a secondary data review of literature to inform the development of a research proposal which then received funding from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund.

Semi-structured interviews were then held (detailed next).

A closing focus group discussion was held with Foyle Women’s Aid team members at the drafting stage of the research to ‘test’, triangulate and finalise the findings.

## Interview profile

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three types of key informants:

1. Victims-survivors of paramilitary-related coercive control: this included women who had exited violent relationships and were already attending and receiving support from services (see ‘Ethics’ below).
2. Policy sector and community workers: this included community development workers, staff of women’s organisations, support workers to those experiencing a wide range of violence and abuse, service providers (e.g. police, housing). Some of these organisations and workers had themselves experienced harm and controls from paramilitaries in the course of their work.
3. Political level actors: in political level leadership roles.

	Number of Interviews	Number of People
Victim-Survivors	6	6 (plus 7 additional cases told by support workers)
Policy and Community Sector Workers	25	37
Political Level Actors	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	32	44 (+ 6 cases through support workers)

As detailed in the table, in total 32 interviews were held with 44 people. This includes two focus group discussions of 6 people in each.

Six victims-survivors came forward to interview. A further 7 'cases' (experiences) of victim-survivors of paramilitary-related coercive control were detailed through interviews with support workers. In total, the research draws from the experiences of 13 women who have experienced paramilitary-related coercive control in their intimate relationships. Many of the policy and community workers had also experienced paramilitary intimidation, threat and controls also.

Recruitment of interviewees came through Foyle Women's Aid and its partner organisations, all providing services to victims-survivors of abuse. Current and past clients were approached and a recruitment call was made through appropriate channels. Significant care was taken to ensure the anonymity and safety of any women who came forward. All interviewees are anonymised in the research and all recordings of interviews have been destroyed.

Significant effort was made to interview women from a PUL and CRN background, and from immigrant communities coming into Northern Ireland.

## Ethics

The study received ethics clearance from University College Dublin. All interviews were designed and held in line with trauma-informed approaches. Interviews were only held with victims-survivors who were already engaged in support services. All victim-survivor interviewees were in advanced stages of help-seeking and no longer living in threatening situations, which was a criteria for participation in the research. Foyle Women's Aid support workers were on-hand to provide support to interviewees post-interview and in some cases support workers sat in on interviews to provide support during interviewing.

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138 DLD\_22

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140 DLD\_08

141 DLD\_32

142 DLD\_15

143 DLD\_14

144 DLD\_15

145 DLD\_16

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147 DLD\_16

148 DLD\_32

149 DLD\_15

150 DLD\_13

151 DLD\_12

152 DLD\_15

153 DLD\_12

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155 DLD\_14

156 Taken from interview DLD\_14.

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182 DLD\_22; DLD\_08; DLD\_13; DLD\_16

183 DLD\_13

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185 DLD\_13

186 DLD\_13

187 DLD\_08

188 DLD\_32

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208 DLD\_12

209 DLD\_15

210 DLD\_16

211 DLD\_15.

212 DLD\_24

213 DLD\_24

214 DLD\_12

215 DLD\_15

216 EMDR is 'Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing' therapy. See here for full explanation: <https://www.emdria.org/about-emdr-therapy/>

217 DLD\_15

218 DLD\_08

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220 DLD\_15

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222 DLD\_32

223 DLD\_12

224 DLD\_22

225 DLD\_22

226 DLD\_01

227 DLD\_32

228 DLD\_32

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232 DLD\_09

233 DLD\_06

234 DLD\_32

235 DLD\_32

# **‘When you know what they are capable of’: Paramilitary-related Gendered Coercive Control**

*Research Report 2024*

*Research carried out by Aisling Swaine,  
Professor of Peace, Security and  
International Law, UCD.*