Women of the Borderlands

A Walking Biographical Study of Women's Everyday Life on the UK/Irish Border

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NORTH SOUTH
RESEARCH
PROGRAMME
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ICON LEGEND

EDUCATION	COMMUNITY	PETROL/FUEL	FRIENDS	ABORTION ACCESS
FAMILY	SHOPPING	BORDER (IM)MOBILITIES	PASSPORT / VISA	HEALTHCARE
BLOCKED DREAMS	WORK	SMUGGLING	BRITISH ARMY	DELIVERIES
SURVEILLANCE	PARAMILITARIES	THREATS, INTIMIDATION & SEXUAL HARASSMENT	CONFLICT	MATERNAL CARE
CUSTOMS HUT	DISCO	CHECKPOINTS	SPORT	BOMBINGS
ISOLATION	GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	RESISTANCE	COMMUNITY SURVEILLANCE	PHYSICAL & SEXUAL VIOLENCE
DEMILITARISATION	STATE SURVEILLANCE	LANDSCAPES	BRITISH ARMY AS PROTECTION	BORDER LIVING

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Report Outline

Project Team

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Dr Niall Gilmartin is a co-Principal Investigator on the WoBla Project and a Lecturer in Sociology at Ulster University.

He has researched and published extensively in gender and conflict, peacebuilding, forced displacement, gender-based violence in conflict, and transitional justice.

Dr Theresa O'Keefe, Principal Investigator

Dr Theresa O'Keefe is a co-Principal Investigator on the WoBla project and Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork.

She is an international expert on gender and conflict zones, with a specialism in Northern Ireland. Her research interests include gender inequality in deeply divided societies, feminist movements in conflict zones and societies in transition, and women's roles in conflict and is widely published in these areas.

Dr Brenda Mondragón Toledo, Research assistant

Dr Mondragón Toledo is a research assistant on the WoBla project at University College Cork. With a PhD in Sociology and Latin American Studies from University College Cork,

Dr. Mondragón-Toledo's work explores Gender-based Violence in Ireland and Mexico through the unique perspective of textile-making practices. Her research interests include feminist epistemologies and methodologies, gender-based violence, and the cultural significance of textiles and fashion.

Dr Dyuti Chakravarty, Former Postdoctoral Researcher

Dr Dyuti Chakravarty (UCC) is an IRC postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork. She was a postdoctoral researcher on the WoBla project from February 2023-March 2024.

She completed her PhD at the School of Sociology in UCD where she wrote a thesis titled 'Break the Cage: Women's Body Politics of Respectability and Autonomy in India and Ireland'. Her research interests include contemporary women's movements, postcolonial and decolonial feminist theories and reproductive justice.

Catherine McElherron, Research Assistant

Catherine McElherron is a recent graduate from the Sociology of Sustainability and Global Challenges Masters at UCC, working on this project from June 2024-February 2025.

Her research interests primarily concern the sociology of climate change and how climate engagement is culturally shaped and embedded. Her Masters thesis, 'The Power of the Eco-llective', situated the lack of meaningful climate engagement in Ireland within wider trends of cultural depletion, proposing nature and community focused events as opportunities to restore connections to others, to self and to nature.

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Fig. 1. The fields next to house where the army helicopters would land

Executive Summary

Despite the political centrality and symbolic importance of the UK-Irish border throughout the last century, its gendered impact, particularly on the everyday lives of women, has received relatively little attention. This research project is the first feminist sociological account of border life on the island of Ireland from the overlooked perspectives of women living in border communities.

Research participants were primarily recruited through organisations to reflect the diversity of border life and ensure representation from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as migrant women originally from outside Ireland and those who do not identity with either of the 'two dominant traditions'. We discovered the border to be a significant structural feature in women's lives, historically and in the present day. The border is not soft and seamless, as it is often conventionally portrayed, but a barrier for women, even post-militarisation.

Because of the erratic nature of the border, the conflict affected women living in borderland communities on both its sides. We also found evidence of forms of gender violence in the borderlands, comprising physical and sexual violence, or the threats of such acts, high levels of male surveillance of women in border communities and other forms of coercive control.

The border restricts women's movement and limits their ability to access healthcare, visit friends and family, travel for work. Migrant women are constantly 'border-conscious' for fear of violating immigration restrictions. Women also develop ways to negotiate and sometimes subvert borderlands controls. Our research uncovered women's smuggling of goods as an economic necessity for family survival.

We heard about the ways women subverted and eluded border checkpoints and found alternative ways to traverse the borderlands. We also documented stories from Protestant women who saw the border and its

numerous infrastructures as necessary protection against IRA attacks on vulnerable Protestants living along the border. Among the recommendations included in this report are: a call for further government investment that is gender-conscious and an improved all-island approach to healthcare, support and community services; a reconsideration of the border as soft or porous to reflect the lived experiences of those who encounter the hard border on a daily basis; further investigation into the gendered and racialised policing of the border and related gender violence; further research on the gendered impact of poverty and economic marginalisation in border communities and improved public transport; and reconfiguration of longer-stay visas and residence permits in either jurisdiction to account for the cross-border nature of living in the borderlands.

The primary outcomes of the project include the collection, dissemination and public archival of the untold stories of women and UK-Irish border, lodged in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive.

This includes a selection of research transcripts, maps of border journeys produced by our research participants and photographs. Through the archive we wish to preserve women's understandings and experiences of the border, making women's important and fascinating stories publicly available, now and in the future.

By documenting unheard voices and experiences, the project's research objectives and outcomes reflect a truly inclusive and comprehensive 'shared island' approach and align with broader goals to foster peaceful, just, equal and inclusive societies.

At a time when the subject of the border and its future have never been so prominent and contested, it is essential to ensure that women's diverse experiences are central to all conversations regarding the border and the future of this shared island.

Introduction

The UK-Irish border[1] was and remains one of the most politically divisive and symbolically important issues on the island of Ireland. During the years of the recent conflict from 1969 to 1998, the border and surrounding borderlands became regions drenched in militarism, surveillance, violence and containment, thus drawing much political and academic attention to the UK/Irish border region. Popular convention suggests that it ceased to be a physical and political issue post the 1998 peace agreement, which, despite its many shortfalls, was lauded for 'de-escalating the border as a political issue'.

As the only UK land border, the vexed outworkings of the 2016 Brexit referendum 're-weaponised partition', and once again positioned the UK-Irish border front and centre politically in ways not seen since the conclusion of the Boundary Commission in 1925 (Cochrane 2024, p.242).

Conspicuously absent from debates, research and conversations on the border, however, has been the perspectives of women. The dominance of state-centric approaches has resulted in a privileged, gender-insensitive view of the border that spoke little of women's experiences of living on and traversing the border during times of crisis or calm.

This report addresses this important gap and advances new insights and understandings of the UK/Irish borderlands from the perspective of women. The report is part of the 'Women of the Borderlands' project, funded by the HEA's North South Shared Island Research Programme.

Commencing in 2022, the project explores how the border shaped the lives of women in communities along its hinterland during the Troubles and since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. It investigates how women navigated and traversed the border on the island of Ireland as part of everyday life and the extent to which the border regulated women's lives.

Based on 'walking' or 'mobile' interviews with 53 participants, 'Women of the Borderlands' aims to:

1. provide the first feminist sociological exploration of everyday life for women living in the border communities

2. document the cultural diversities in relation to the border

3. aid the process of reconciliation on the island by building a collective history of women's border life

4. document, uncover and raise awareness of gendered impact of the border, especially rural women's voices

5. collect, disseminate and preserve through public archive the untold stories of women and UK-Irish border life

6. uncover the extent to which gender patterns found in other borderlands apply to Ireland, including but not limited to gender-based violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors.

This report presents a range of issues and findings, including evidence of forms of gender-based violence in the borderlands, comprising physical and sexual violence, and threats of such acts, high levels of male surveillance of women in border communities and other forms of coercive control.

The border restricts women's movement and limits their ability to access healthcare, visit friends and family, travel for work. Our work documents the racialised policing practices of the border where migrant women are constantly 'border-conscious' for fear of violating immigration restrictions. Women also develop ways to negotiate and sometimes subvert borderlands controls.

Our research uncovered women's smuggling of goods as an economic necessity for family survival. We also heard about the ways women subverted and eluded border checkpoints and found alternative ways around the borderlands.

We also documented stories from Protestant women who saw the border and its numerous infrastructures as necessary protection against IRA attacks on vulnerable Protestants living along the border. Some research participants joined the UDR and RUC as a way of playing their part in securing the border during the Troubles.

This report builds upon existing international literature and contributes important new insights not only to future conversations about the UK/Irish border but also to global conversations on gender and borders as well as walking biographical research methods. The next section outlines our research methodology and research participants.

Following this, the report then spotlights three selected key findings; 1. Gender, Violence and Policed Mobilities, 2. Women's Agency and Actions, and 3. Racial Policing of Women at the Border. The report then details the project's public archive and social media outreach. The report concludes with our policy recommendations.

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1   Although often dubbed the 'Irish Border', we use the term UK/Irish Border to reflect the fact that both states on the island policed and continue to police the border.

Fig. 2. A former British Army mobile checkpoint site

Methods

We conducted research interviews with 53 women who live in the UK/Irish borderlands and previously/continue to cross the border as part of their daily lives. Ethical approval for the research was granted by UCC and UU. Fieldwork occurred between May 2023 and March 2024. Accessing potential participants came through various pathways, including key gatekeepers in pertinent community organisations and political groups in the region, our 'call for participants' flyer distributed via social media. Participation was not restricted by location and interviews were conducted across the full length of the border. Of the 53 participants, seven women were from ethnic minority communities.

The primary method of research we used was 'walking interviews'. Pioneered by Professor Maggie O'Neill at UCC, Walking Interviews as a Biographical Method (WIBM) focuses on 'important connections with doing sociological research with marginalised peoples, as in urban sociology; urban geographers; critical theory; and participatory methodologies (increasingly utilising arts-based practices, including the work of walking artists)' (O'Neill and Roberts, 2020; 3).

Ramsden (2017) contends that it allows for critical exploration of the 'cultural geographies of cities through performative and affectual approaches, offering unique, yet stimulating everyday opportunities for encountering the strange and stranger within familiar neighbourhoods' (2017: 56).

As an innovative method of interviewing, 'walking interviews' allows participants to share knowledges derived from their corporeal interaction with the researcher, thereby challenging power inequalities typically synonymous with social research (Fathi, 2023). In contrast to the standard interview practice comprising a set of pre-determined questions, the 'walking method' cultivates the power and autonomy of the research participants as they ultimately direct the control the flow of conversation and narrative. As an embodied experience, ultimately it the research participant who has the expertise and knowledge regarding the significance of certain places and events.

Methodology

Mobile methods (walking and driving): through these mobile interviews, women share their everyday journeys —be it for work, family visits, leisure or errands- highlighting how border life shapes their world.

The fieldwork research presented several challenges due to changes in the landscape.

Since demilitarisation and the opening up of roads, routes that were once walkable now have increased traffic making it challenging to stop, walk or take photos.

Furthermore, the 'walking family of methods' is a potentially transformative means of examining the striated layers of meaning inscribed into public space and everyday life in the aftermath of political violence.

Despite the growing popularity of these methods across a host of disciplinary fields, they have rarely been applied to these purposes in post-conflict space (Robinson and McClelland, 2020). Insights generated through walking methods have the potential to problematize dominant productions of post-conflict space by revealing alternative narratives of the past and alternative investitures in places and landscapes (Robinson and McClelland, 2020).

Like most conflict regions across the world, the narratives that predominate the post-conflict discourse in the North of Ireland tend to be male. A long-standing commitment within feminist methodologies is to not only criticize but to challenge the status quo (Leavy and Harris, 2019).

Therefore, the use of a walking or mobile method coupled with the feminist staple of semi-structured interviews and map drawing exercise, was a robust and effective methodological approach for developing rich descriptions of women's lives in Ireland's borderlands.

While 'ethnographic walks' and 'walking methods' have been used to explore issues of physical segregation, territory and public space in Northern Ireland (Mitchell and Kelly, 2011; Smyth and McKnight, 2013; Roulston et al., 2017; Hocking et al., 2018), much of this work occurred in the urban centre of Belfast. Though there is a small body of work examining border lives, this research is the first feminist sociological exploration of women's rural border lives using a mobile method.

Typically, there were two parts to each interview. First, participants were invited to undertake a mapping exercise. The purpose of this was to give the opportunity for women to outline the border and borderlands regions as they 'see it' and experienced it.

During this part, participants were invited to sketch out the borderlands on a blank sheet of paper, pinpointing places of significance, such as shops, checkpoints, cratered roads, etc. and also to sketch out typical routes they would have taken as part of their everyday lives. The activity also functioned to spark up initial memories and stories that were deemed to be significant. The mapping exercise also functioned as a segue into the second part of the interview, the 'walking' or mobile interview.

However, the majority of our 'walking interviews' were in fact conducted by use of car, with only a small quantity utilising walking as an option. There were many reasons for this; first was the issue of physical safety. Many of the interview locations were rural, isolated roads, often characterised by poor or non-existent pedestrian infrastructure and road safety.

Walking was simply too dangerous on what are rural roads but also roads with increased levels of traffic. Second was the physical ability of the participants where many were simply unable to walk the distances involved in traversing the Irish borderlands. In most cases, participants used cars to recreate their typical everyday journeys and then stopped and got out of the car at points of significance within their own narratives and biographies.

Additionally, the mobile interview proved to be a challenge in the interviews with racialized migrant women and women seeking asylum on the island. With

increased border patrols that include racial profiling of people, we decided against using a mobile component for those participants, in the interests of their safety and wellbeing. In these instances, persons were invited to do the mapping activity, followed by a semi-structured interview at a location of their choosing. In this way, our mobile method effectively adhered to the same principles as a 'walking method' and overall, we found the social meanings provoked by participants being in certain parts of the border landscape, provoked richly descriptive memories, narratives and perspectives. In a strict sense, our methodological approach embodied a 'mobile ethnography' (Sheller and Urry, 2006), while drawing from the conceptual well of 'walking methods'.
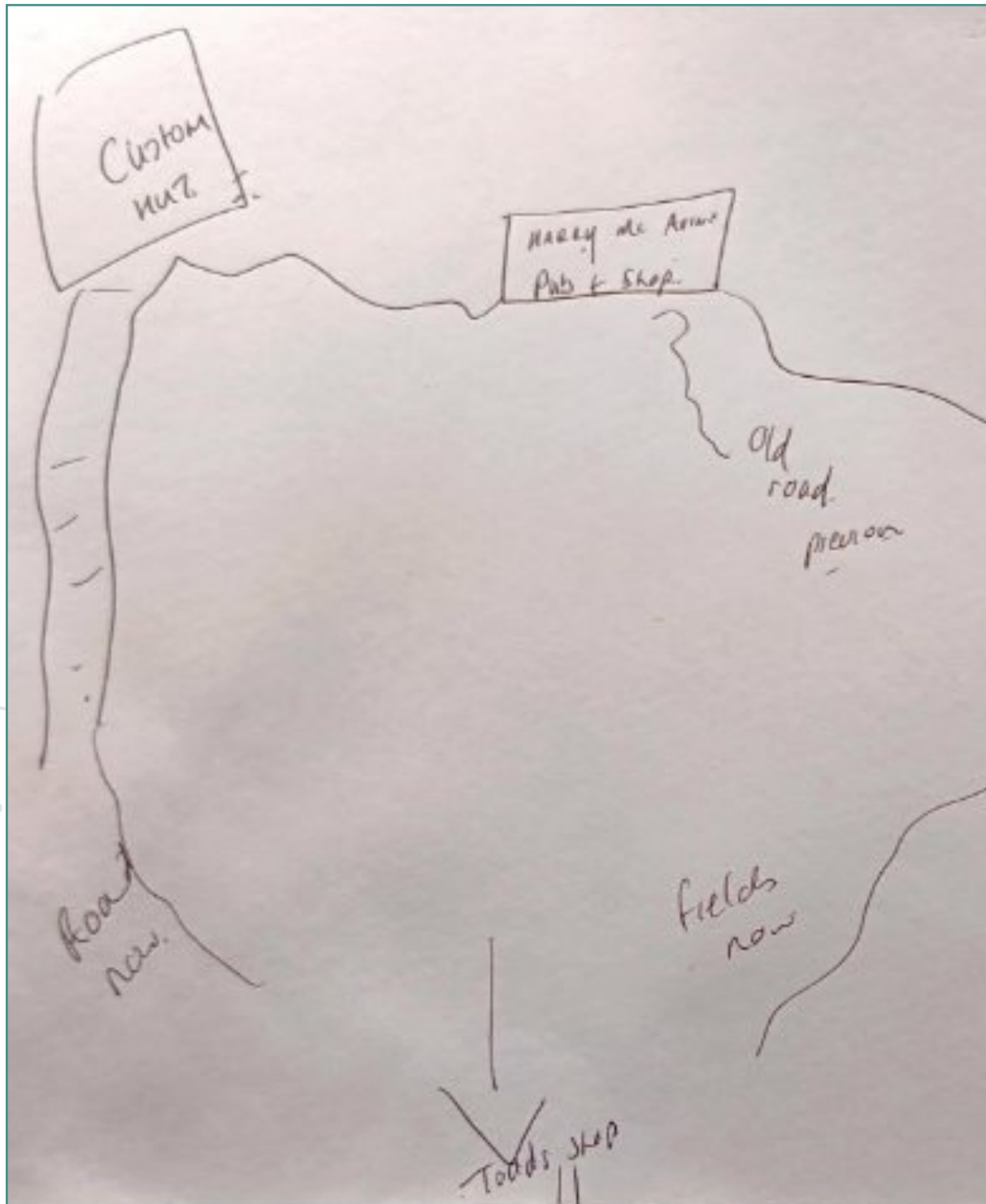

Fig. 3. Participant Map

Findings

There have been widespread and rapid societal shifts over short periods of time in the border communities. From the imposition of customs controls post partition, to the militarisation of the border during the Troubles and demilitarisation post Good Friday Agreement, to public health emergencies like foot and mouth outbreaks and the COVID-19 pandemic, and new post-Brexit and anti-immigration policing practices there have been rapid reconfigurations of the border and border controls in a short period of time.

The erratic nature of the boundary line means women's relationship to the border is not static as changes to the landscape and bordering practices continue to occur over time. The border is traversed strategically – though car travel is common, women used row boats for smuggling, bicycles for work, travelled on foot across fields spanning to border for discos.

How and when women navigate the borderlands was and continues to be shaped by lack of access to public transport, militarisation and racialised border policing. Based on our analysis of the data we have arrived at three overarching findings:

1. The border has and continues to be a central organising force in the lives of women who inhabit the borderlands

2. The conflict was not confined to north of Ireland but bled across and around the border and impacted the daily lives of women in borderland communities on either side

3. It is dangerous to consider the border as soft, porous or seamless as it hides women's experiences of the border. The border has been a site of insecurity, violence and forced immobilities for women who live in the borderlands. Our research uncovered a diverse range of issues pertinent to women's lives in the border regions.

We found evidence of:

Border (im)mobilities: Disruption to everyday travel for purposes such as grocery shopping, leisure, caring for relatives, sport, church attendance, education, health care and employment caused by Army & Police checkpoints; paramilitary activity; cratered roads and bridges; blocked roads; lack of access to transport, Women's mobility was restricted; this impacted how, when and why they travelled and with whom. Women feared travelling alone or at night.

Benefits of the border: smuggling; local 'cottage industries'; possible access to health, education, tourism; political activism.

Rural isolation: this includes lack of state resources and investment in communities, poverty, limited public transportation, difficulty accessing healthcare, and supports for victims of gender-based violence. Also individual isolation – more difficult to create and sustain support networks and/or access existing support networks.

Border as a site of gender-based violence: comprising coercive, physical and sexual violence, or the threats of such acts, high levels of male surveillance of women in border communities and other forms of coercive control by state forces and republican and loyalist organisations. This impacted women's mobilities in border communities. We also found evidence of gender inequality throughout border communities, particularly socio-economic disparities.

Border as a site of feminised frontier work: Many border regions marked by relatively high levels of unemployment, underinvestment, poverty, among others. Women's work, paid and unpaid, is vital to survival of families and rural communities. Women cross borders to work in places such factories, hospitals, education, among others. Women's smuggling was primarily concerned with subsistence as was their informal labour in cottage industries.

Border as a site of agency, subversion and resistance: Our research advances new insights and understandings of women's agency and actions in contested borderlands regions such as the UK/Irish border. Our research traced women's 'rituals of resistance', that being, their everyday acts of subverting, negotiating and evading border crossings and surveillance for the purposes of shopping, education, care-work, accessing health care, leisure, smuggling, as well as acts that are associated with traditional understandings of political activism such as the Border Roads Campaign in the 1990s and feminist smuggling of abortion pills. For those from a Protestant background, their agency resided in actively patrolling and securing the border via membership of the RUC or UDR, or in active support for family members who joined either organisations.

De-Bordering and Re-Bordering: Evidence of racial policing of the UK-Irish border by state authorities in both jurisdictions. Our research indicates fear, anxiety and severe levels of restriction in movement for migrant women and person seeking asylum. The impact of these restrictions caused vast disruption in terms of time, travel, family and social networks, accessing health and education, and other public services. This research robustly challenges the conventional view that Ireland has enjoyed a 'soft' or 'invisible' border since de-militarisation in the aftermath of the 1998 Agreement. For racial and ethnic minority women, the UK-Irish border simply reconfigured its presence and power during the peace process, via a process of re-bordering.

Findings Spotlight 1:
Gender, Violence and Policed Mobilities

Conflict-Related GBV and the Troubles

Gender-based violence (GBV) is generally accepted to mean violence that is perpetrated against a person because of their gender or forms of violence that disproportionately affects persons of a particular gender. GBV includes a spectrum of harmful practices, that may be physical, sexual, psychological or economic.

More recently, coercive control has been legally recognised as a form of GBV, criminalised in the Republic (2018) and Northern Ireland (2022), wherein both jurisdictions similarly define it as engaging in behaviour that is controlling and causes a person to fear that violence will be used against them. Coercive control consists of "a pattern of controlling behaviours and acts which may include, threats, humiliation and intimidation, assaults or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim." (Women's Aid NI website, 2025).

Fear is thus an important instrument of coercive control. Coercive control is gradual and its harms accrue over time. Conflict-related GBV is a form of political violence, used by political actors such as governments, militia, rebel groups, paramilitary or terrorist organisations (Cockburn, 2004; Leatherman, 2011; Wood, 2009).

Safety and freedom of movement have been key concerns for women living in rural communities spanning the border, especially during the Troubles. Rates of GBV are disproportionately higher in Northern Ireland than most anywhere else in Europe (Women's Policy Group t, 2023). A recent all-island report by the National Women's Council and Women's Aid Federation NI entitled 'North South Co-Operation to Tackle Violence Against Women' (Nov2024) stated that the UK-Irish border represents a significant barrier to women seeking to flee violence and found that the legacy of the conflict and paramilitary organisations complicated efforts to challenge and address violence against women and girls.

Similarly, Aisling Swaine (2024) has highlighted facets of conflict-related GBV in Northern Ireland and has argued for a coercive control framework to be applied to conflict-related gender and sexual violence, a call we echo.

Our research indicates that the militarisation of the border during the Troubles resulted in significant military infrastructure and weaponry throughout rural communities along the borderlands in Northern Ireland. The operations of armed republican and loyalist groups, state checkpoints and watchtowers were a feature of border life, as was the landing of British Army helicopters in fields attached to private homes, army patrols, and the use of back gardens, sheds and outbuildings by state forces and paramilitary groups. Incursions of the British Army across the border and into the Republic were also not unusual due to the arbitrary and, in some ways, invisible nature of the border. Roadblocks erected by republican and loyalist groups also featured in our research.

Fig. 4. Crossmaglen police station

This militarisation of the border brought women into contact with state forces on a regular basis as they travelled for paid work or care duties, such as grocery shopping, caring for an ill, disabled or elderly loved one, bringing children to/from school. With the proliferation of fixed and mobile checkpoints, journeys made by women around the border meant an encounter with the state were inevitable. Because of the erratic nature of the border, women who lived in the Republic's borderlands also encountered checkpoints as part of their daily routines when their place of work, nearest shop, family or social connections were d located on the UK side of the border. Similarly, the most direct or quickest journey times between points in the Republic would entail being forced to travel across the border and through checkpoints.

Fixed checkpoints might encompass an elaborate structure with a hut and lookout often located on rural roads in areas that were not densely populated. Mobile checkpoints frequently appeared in random locations on rural roads and in close proximity to other checkpoints, and the soldiers were usually all

or mostly men.

Fig. 5. Former Checkpoint

While women were often prominent actors in armed Republicanism as well as in State forces and armed Loyalist groups, these organisations were however male dominated, often reflecting and embodying masculine values and cultures (Gilmartin 2017, 2019; O'Keefe 2003, 2013).

Therefore, our research indicates that a gender regime was in effect in the borderlands during the Troubles, that dictated women's movements and limited their freedoms, safety and security. This regime included forms of conflict-related GBV from state and non-state actors. Though this research was not especially designed to study conflict-related GBV, it came to the surface in many interviews.

The main form of conflict-related GBV resembled was coercive control, including surveillance of women and its use as an instrument of power over women, threats, intimidation and sexual harassment. We also uncovered evidence of physical and sexual violence and abuse.

A 'Climate of Fear' was used to police women living in the borderlands during the Troubles, was operationalised and taken advantage of by state and non-state actors (state forces and paramilitary organisations) and was reinforced by wider social norms that allowed for the control of women's behaviours and movements.

This fear was connected to threats of GBV or stories of GBV circulating in the community that served as a warning to women that threats may be actualised. Fear, as a form of gendered violence, limited the mobilities of many women living in communities along either side of the border, impeded daily routines and contributed to their isolation.

1.1 Surveillance

Women in the borderlands experienced extreme levels of surveillance from their own communities, from paramilitary organisations and from security forces. Unlike urban centres, there was little anonymity in rural communities and so surveillance was virtually inescapable and thus a powerful mechanism to exert control.

1.1.a Community surveillance

Women's dating practices were scrutinised and their choice of partners policed, even violently, by their communities.

A Catholic woman explains:

"And it was very dangerous for a Catholic girl to go out with a soldier; they could be shot. Yeah, some of them were. Others just emigrated and never came back, you know."

Interviewer 1: And would there have been quite a few girls that went out with British soldiers?

"Oh some did, yeah – especially in cities, not- not locally because everybody knows everybody in the country, but in the city, the way people on one street wouldn't know people on the next street, nobody to tell tales, you know?"

Interviewer 1: So there was that kind of social control on who you could go out with?

"Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah, absolutely. You grew up as a child knowing that, you know, yeah."

This community surveillance was not confined to Catholic women as a woman from the Protestant tradition outlines:

"Certainly coming from my Protestant background there's freedom up to a point but we have a lot of gatekeepers that exist in our communities who want to keep those men and women only doing what they think they should be doing are going where they think they should be gone or having relationships which who they think they should be having relationships with ....the way I was brought up was you didn't have a choice you must marry a Protestant and is probably the same in your faith but you had to marry Protestant, you're only allowed to go to anything social that was only Protestant, that was all Protestant. So you were corralled into a path whether they wanted to go down to it or not. Outside the school, which was a big Catholic school, we were not allowed to meet those Catholic men or women outside of school."

1.1.b State surveillance

Surveillance was used by security forces as a tool to police women's behaviour. Many watchtowers, bases, and other forms of state surveillance were near homes, schools, pubs, sports facilities, and other social and community hubs. Surveillance was ominpresent. The home, where women were traditionally located, became an extension of the battlefield:

"I remember, when I was a young mother living in the building that I'm living in now, we'd just moved there in the early 90s, and I remember bathing the baby in the kitchen sink like, and it was an old building we were renovating it, and I remember seeing these heads walking past the back window of my house, and it was the army out doing their surveillance. Sure it scared the life out of me, because you could see these trees pop up - they'd wear this camouflage on their hats, and sure it scared the life out of me. I nearly dropped the baby. And like, he was gawking through the window, I was thinking 'Have I no privacy here? Because I could've been doing anything; I need to get a curtain here'. So like that's the level of invasion of privacy that you had"

Long-range watching and listening devices allowed for the monitoring of life's most private practices and spaces.

"I didn't need to put a light on in the bathroom if I get up at night; the whole place was lit up by the checkpoint. Even when I was sitting on the loo, I used to think soldiers could see- and they could! They could see me, you know? They could, and they recorded your conversations – you had to be very careful what you said."

The familiarity garnered through surveillance could be used to scare women in later encounters as a way of issuing a threat.

"Yeah, so when my- I remember them once saying to me, cause my clothesline faces- was facing the new checkpoint, behind [name] hill, and they'd say to me 'Seen you hanging your panties on the lines this morning, [woman's name]' and like you just- horrible things, like. And then you'd be kind of scared and, you know-"

1.2 Threats, Intimidation and sexual harassment

Evidence of threats, intimidation and sexual harassment experienced by women who lived around the militarised border was also uncovered through our research. This includes threats of sexual violence from members of armed republican organisations:

"I've heard them threatening people with, 'we will rape you' and that, and other people that I've listened to over the years, 'we will have our own way with you before we let you go'."

Women also reported experiences of threats and sexual harassment in their daily encounters with state forces. Some of our participants reported comments on women's bodies or clothes made by passing army foot patrols communicated in a manner meant to intimidate.

As this woman explains

"You could hear the whistling over at women and nobody would pay any heed to them, you know you just never made eye contact with them, you just needed to keep looking straight ahead; tunnel vision you know".

When asked how this made them feel they replied

"Uncomfortable you would feel uncomfortable yes and that's the way it was".

Interviewer: Frightened? Would it make you feel frightened?

"Yes, yes."

Another woman recalls

"For me, as a younger woman, you'd- they'd get very cheeky, very dirty to you, dirty chat, you know...and you'd be scared on your own."

Power was exercised through unpredictability of these encounters and the knowledge that they could, at any time, unfurl into a dangerous encounter.

[Interviewee 1] "They were unofficial and unapproved, like, they would just stop any car- so, at 12:00 at night, you could be coming home from your relations, that's true, and you just see this flashing light in front of you, and you sort of knew what it was. And it was very intimidating because the statistics were very bad, you know? There was a lot of people murdered for no good reason, just, by an unapproved checkpoint like that. And you'd always fear for your life too, wouldn't you?"

[Interviewee 2] "Except, you could just run into a mobile group of soldiers, you know, not at the checkpoint, you could run into- they did have a flashing light, and you could run into them at any stage at night, you know, coming home on your own, and you could meet them

anywhere as well, you could go through one checkpoint but you could meet them."

Anxiety and fear of checkpoints was therefore common amongst our research participants, including some women from Protestant communities. Participants reported hearing stories of women who, while driving alone, were taken out of their cars and searched day or night in secluded security sheds or huts that were often located on rural roads.

Fig. 6. Former checkpoint, Aughnacloy

1.3. Physical and sexual violence

One of the more common references to GBV throughout the interviews was tarring and feathering. Used by republican paramilitaries until the late 1970s, women were tied to posts in visible locations in a town or village, covered in tar and doused in feathers. Her hair was also typically shaved to ensure public humiliation would last long after the tar was cleaned away.

"On the Sunday morning we came out of mass and there was a girl tied to a pole and she was tarred and feathered in front of us all, for everybody to see and it was because she talked to soldiers the day before. The road was closed because the workmen or the housing executive or whatever they were called the road men were blasting stone and they stopped her walking and the soldiers happened to come along in the field beside her and happened to say 'what's your name and why are you standing there?' And she talked away to them and the next day she was tarred and feathered."

And in another border community a group of women recall tarring and feathering as: "a stigma that stayed with you" that "ostracised" women from their community. This gendered form of punishment meant that women felt as if they were always under surveillance from

and within the community, and thus highlights the stark contrast between urban and rural surveillance environments.

Some participants also reported second-hand knowledge of rape at the hands of IRA members. We were also told of child sexual abuse and coverup by members of the IRA. The climate of fear supported by surveillance and threats ensures that even today a fear of speaking out about this violence persists.

Interviewer: So there was a code of silence around sexual abuse...:

"Oh Aye yes, yes there would be yes.... Especially if it was some of theirs, some of their gang as they would call it, political people that were actually sexually abusing other children because I myself was sexually abused by, his brother was a top IRA man and he threatened, threatened me as a child, that I would be shot and stuff like that... and even today people are afraid to stand up against people who were political and there has been a few cases that have succeeded or have come to light but an awful lot of people around here I would say were sexually abused by individuals with political but they won't say a word because they're afraid."

We also have evidence of young girls used as human shields by state forces, a war crime under the Geneva Convention. Young girls are used as shields because soldiers may perceive them as less likely to be shot because of social norms regarding the killing of women and children in combat.

Thus, they can be sought out by soldiers to protect them from gunfire, (Rusinova, 2011). In the exchange below, two participants recall their experiences as children:

"Every time as a kid when you were going up the town the army will be around the roads all the time but the minute you go to cross the road they crossed with you because they would be using you as a shield and sometimes [laughs] I was only a child but I used to run quicker so that they couldn't use me as a shield in case somebody said right shoot that and take a shot now, but then someone would say kids in the way you cannot shoot but some of them didn't care you know."

"But there was one time when you were over at the shop, and the soldier put you in front and he was moving with you and you were like a shield like; he was holding her up so she could walk and he was there and the bullet wouldn't be fired."

In addition to these key examples, women were indirect victims of the physical violence that killed or maimed men who were active in military, police or paramilitary organisations. For example, one of our research participants experienced and continues to experience serious psychological harms after witnessing the killing of her husband, a member of the security forces, by an IRA car bomb near a border town.

As the IRA targeted off-duty RUC and UDR personnel, this invariably meant that those women who were wives, partners, or close relatives, also lived with the anxiety, stress and fear of republican violence. Many participants recalled with almost incredulity the daily morning rituals of checking under their cars for bombs, as well as checking bins, gardens, gates, and walls for any suspicious devices or activity.

For many, their rural isolation exacerbated their fear and sense of vulnerability. In addition, women also suffered economic hardship upon becoming the sole earner in the family upon the death, disablement or imprisonment of a partner. These are, in some ways, hidden traumas and as such indirect forms of gender-based violence.

1.4 Impact of conflict-related GBV

GBV directly impacted women's sense of security and safety, and the coercive practices outlined above created a climate of fear for women living in the borderlands. This was predicated on unpredictability of encounters and the mechanisms to threaten violence, commit violence and to silence it. This restricted women's freedom of movement as many reported curtailing their own activities and behaviours out of fear.

Research participants were always careful to have certain people accompany them on their journeys, depending on certain factors such as nighttime journeys, isolated roads or if specific army regiments were currently on tour in the region.

Even on journeys that did not cross the sovereign frontier, the saturation of military presence in their communities, such as mobile patrols and checkpoints, the possibility of republican and loyalist attacks, meant women had to consistently factor in the possibility of being stopped, questioned and detained.

Everyday journeys therefore required advance planning, time, thought, and labour – women's mobility was frequently contingent on the availability or assistance of others, adding further layers to the general challenging and unpredictable conditions of borderland travel.

Example 1. "Well, I suppose women would be afraid, you know, they wouldn't want to be in that situation on their own. You know, if you're on your own, then, there's nobody to speak out and say this actually happened. Like it could be ten of them [British Army] against one person."

Example 2. "I would have never seen my mother ever drive across the border, out of fear. You know, she would have always been with dad."

Others avoided moving around the borderlands at night as this exchange between two participants illustrates:

Woman 1 "Well, you didn't know what was around at night."

Interviewer: So, you wouldn't go out, say, around 9-9.30 in the nighttime?

Woman 2 "You definitely wouldn't try and walk or cycle into Aughnacloy, no, [chuckles] no definitely not."

This has a direct impact on women's ability to work, care, access healthcare, socialise or organise outside the home. This contributed to isolation, a theme that emerged throughout the data, as well as a dependency on others and it placed limits on their autonomy. There was also a reticence to discuss gender-based violence for fear of reprisals.

This is compounded by the familiarity that exists within small, rural communities, and makes anonymity difficult. This creates barriers for women's access to support services, which are then compounded by mobility restrictions placed on those unable to cross the border due to immigration status.

Findings Spotlight 2 :
Women's Agency and Actions

Though it is of course important to document the gendered insecurities and deleterious ways that borders – and particularly militarised borders - impact women's daily lives, it is essential to explore women's agency regarding how they negotiate and often subvert borders and their numerous manifestations (Anzaldúa 1987). Our research found many instances and ways in which women negotiated the UK/Irish border including:

- **Smuggling**
  (primarily for economic necessity)

- **'Everyday Manoeuvres'**
  (subverting checkpoints; alternative routes; direct confrontations)

- **Activism:**
  Feminist activism; Border Roads Campaign

- **Protecting the Border**
  (Women joining or supporting the army & police)

Throughout its history, it has always been possible to cross the UK/Irish border where it runs through fields, forested areas or open country. Cross-border movement was facilitated and motivated by the myriads of social, familial, cultural and economic networks that existed. Our research traced women's 'rituals of resistance', that being, their everyday acts of subverting, negotiating and evading border crossings and surveillance for the purposes of shopping, education, care-work, accessing health care, leisure, smuggling, as well as acts that are associated with traditional understandings of political activism.

2.1 Smuggling

The creation of the customs barrier in 1923 was the catalyst for the financial partition of the two states on the island of Ireland, creating a system of duties payable on the movement of goods between the two jurisdictions as well as a new set of arrangements for the regulation of the movement of people and goods across the border, which included paperwork, permits, custom points, practices of inspection and officially approved routes for travel.

In 1923, British and Irish authorities agreed on 15 "approved frontier crossing points" for the purposes of inspecting goods in daytime hours. Many unapproved routes crossing the border remained open to pedestrians but travelling on them by vehicle was prohibited. People moving goods for personal use or sale were required to cross the border at officially designated crossing places where their goods could be checked, and where appropriate, duties would be imposed (Nash and Reid 2010, 271).

The UK/Irish border regions have historically high levels of economic and social disadvantage (O'Dowd, Corrigan and Moore, 1995; Nash et al 2016). The Irish Border Areas report, produced in 1983 by the European Economic and Social Committee, pointed to heavy dependence on agriculture encumbered by 'poor soil, established patterns of inheritance and marriage, and farm size' (Daly 2023).

The obvious consequences are that those living in the border area suffered from low incomes, little industrial employment, high unemployment, and significant outward migration (Laffan and Payne, 2001). Unemployment both of women and men in borderland households adds to the pressure on women to find ways to ensure household survival.

Women's cross border informal economy included self-employment (cottage industry such as lace making; subsistence farming); waged labour (casual, informal labour, mainly in manufacturing), and of course, smuggling (mostly food or items of subsistence). One Participant, a Republican from Tyrone stated:

"Economically smuggling would have been a huge part of people's lives around here and women would be involved in that too, so it depends on what the big differentials were. If it was butter or sugar or diesel or cigarettes or drink whatever was cheaper on one side or the other, people crossed it to get that. There would have been people on bikes going across the border in the 40s and 50s even before the roads were blown up... and while there's a border there's going to be a black economy and that was also a big part of our lives."

For many women, smuggling was linked to 'survival' due to issues of unemployment, poverty, poor economic investment in the region, scarcity of certain resources. In a general climate of poverty, food bought more cheaply in the North meant a great deal to individuals and families and relatively very little to the government (Nash et al. 2013, 53).

Many research participants often expressed their anxiety and fear before, during and after acts of smuggling but furthermore, as primary head of family households, they were profoundly aware of the material consequences for their families if their smuggling endeavours were detected.

For all participants, smuggling was an act of survival. One participant, aged in her 80s and from the

Fermanagh-Monaghan region recalled:

"People walked up and down here continuously smuggling but women used to walk carrying baskets of eggs across the fields; there was no roads at this time it was all fields and they would walk a very long way from Belturbet in Co. Cavan...probably about two miles, two or three miles taking baskets of eggs for sale and the reason they did that it was like a barter exchange... they would sell the eggs and then exchange, they would get white breads"

While smuggling food staples, our research uncovered other creative forms of smuggling materials such as rubber, lace, and other such materials to feed a prolific cottage industry in border regions, created and sustained by women.

For example, research participants in Crossmaglen brought some of their lace work to interviews to show us samples of their work, work which they say was vital in supplementing declining farming incomes of houses marked by unemployment.
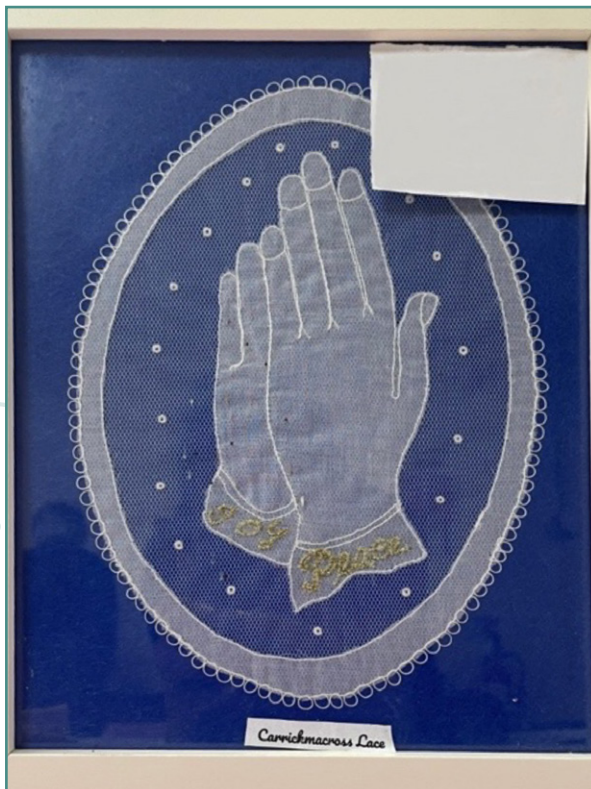

Fig 7. A sample of the lace work undertaken by women. This piece was part of a collection of lace work by some of the women at the South Armagh Rural Women's Network in Crossmaglen

Others spoke of instances where family homes and farms close to the border would let people store goods there for a paid fee, until an opportune moment arose to transport the goods across the border, again much of which was provoked by survival, not be personal gain or profit.

Economic self-sufficiency is an important part of women's positive self-evaluation and respect. Furthermore, smuggling fostered a culture of defiance among border communities (Leary 2016, 163).

For research participants, smuggling and other economic activities provided women with rare public activism that defied the rule of the state. For many women, smuggling was never a lifestyle choice or provoked by the desire for luxury items – smuggling was born out of economic necessity, social class, and poverty.

In the case of the UK/Irish borderlands, women used motherhood and the creative use of children to augment their 'myth of innocence' during border crossings. A participant from the Derry-Donegal border region outlined their creative approaches:

"The children were put sitting on the sweets or children sitting on the new clothes and they would be encouraged to cry crossing the border as a diversionary tactic. So I used to adopt that for ourselves whenever we were travelling with children; I would encourage them to cry but sometimes we didn't need that because they got sick and there was as much of a smell it would drive the customs officer away from all the bottles of wine we had smuggled."

Similarly, another participant from the border near South Armagh recalled "smuggling 52 pounds of butter" by removing the mattress from her baby's pram and placing the butter on the base of the pram with the baby sleeping above it.

Smuggling was also an important weapon for feminists active in abortion support campaigns. Before the Repeal referendum of 2018, reproductive rights were extremely limited in Ireland, north and south. Abortion pills, also known as early medical abortion (EMA), first entered Ireland in 2006 when Women on Web launched a telemedical abortion service that mailed pills to abortion-seekers after an online medical consultation (Aiken et al., 2017).

The availability of abortion pills transformed Ireland's abortion regime, stretching the state's ability to limit women's access to abortion pills. Although the two are separate legal jurisdictions, the relatively open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic was utilised by feminist activists to construct new forms of mobility for EMA on the island (Calkin 2021, 169).

Research participants spoke of the strategic and well-organised ways in which EMA pills were delivered into postal addresses in the North, where they were then repackaged and posted from post boxes across the border in the Republic. One participant stated that feminist activist had this form of smuggling down to "a fine art", knowing locations, postal times and delivery times across a range of border locations. This was particularly important in cases where pills were needed as a matter of urgency.

Fig.8. One of the Post Office Boxes used by feminist activists to mail abortion pills across the border into the Republic.

A consideration of women's smuggling of abortion pills in the context of the UK-Irish borderlands demonstrates that:

- the UK-Irish border constitutes a source of women's insecurity regarding access to abortion and reproductive healthcare.

- how women's reproductive activism transgresses borderlands regimes, effectively using borderlands as a terrain for subversion and resistance.

The ephemeral flow of cheap pharmaceuticals that travel through existing digital platforms, postal infrastructure and border checkpoints, erodes the sovereignty of the state and its ability to control borders and therefore, some conventional state frameworks to prohibit abortion may become obsolete (Calkin 2021, 164).

While the normalisation of flouting the law and taxation system may shock the outsider, for those within the borderlands, smuggling represented for some, a way of securing families' income and wellbeing, an identity, a way of life, a political and subversive act.

2.2 Everyday Manoeuvres

Alongside smuggling, women engaged in subversive manoeuvres, everyday acts of defiance, to negotiate the border and bordering practices. As outlined above, the impact of the border in terms of everyday mobility was transformed by militarisation of borderlands and particularly state endeavours to seal the border during the Troubles. The overwhelming majority of cross-border routes to motor traffic were closed; of the 180 existing cross-border roads, only sixteen points were designated as official, 'approved' points where goods and vehicles could legally cross the border (Daly 2023).

The state's objective of course was to regulate and effectively funnel all cross-border movement into military checkpoints along the border where persons were stopped, questioned about the purpose of their journey, and their vehicle and license details were checked.

Women's everyday journeys included grocery shopping, leisure, education, health care and employment, among others. As noted above, despite the regularity of their borderland journeys, all participants spoke of their fear, anxiety and uncertainty each time they encountered mobile or permanent border checks.

Women also did not need to cross the border to meet with its infrastructure, especially in the case of those living on the northern side of the border. Though

each participant articulated narratives of fear and inconvenience, most undertook to continue their lives and refused to fundamentally alter their routines.

Though women's lives were saturated in various machinations of state and non-state surveillance, they endeavoured in developing ways and means to resist, subvert or evade these forms of control. One participant, aged in her 50s travelled daily from Dundalk to Newry for the purposes of work and grew increasingly frustrated with the delays and intimidation at British Army checkpoints. Her initial strategy was to befriend soldiers at checkpoints. When that strategy proved ineffective, she switched tactic:

"Then I decided I would beat them at their own game and looked up the legislation and the pace regulations in terms of how long they could detain me; [it was] intimidating the way they would lean into you...they would ask you for your licence and then they will call you by your first name, so a total lack of respect and so I would say to them 'OK you are addressing me by my first name what's your first name? I'm entitled to ask you what your first name is' and so they would be taken aback by this and normally they would get their Sergeant or commanding officer. And he gave me his first name, and I would say 'OK Alan what are you going to do with me; are you going to check my tyres, my licence? I am crossing the border for work like I do everyday blah blah blah' and initially he was officious and almost became friends but then he was moved on".

The continuous change in regiments every six months tempered the effectiveness of such an approach and after three years as a strategy, our participant decided to then use 'unapproved roads' to subvert the authority of checkpoints.

In contrast, others were willing and capable of directly confronting the various apparatus of state power while others innovatively evaded borderlands controls and surveillance. In many instances, particularly on social occasions such as crossing the border for dances or parties, women simply forged alternative routes. One Republican woman from Tyrone stated:

"I wouldn't have just known roads around here; I knew fields, because you would have had to find alternative ways around checkpoints and so before the border roads were reinstated [post-1998], you would have to be creative how you got from A to B. We were going to Monaghan to a nightclub. So there was a very decent wee landowner at Tynan and we would have went in through his fields and as long as you're closing [the gate] behind you... he had a wee container in the hedge and you throw [sic] in a couple of pound as the toll and you could've traversed the border and come out at one of these roads and brought you in the back way into Monaghan. So you had to use all your ingenuity."

2.3 Securing the Borderlands

Participants from the Protestant community saw the military infrastructure, and overall border frontier as necessary protection for vulnerable Protestant communities from IRA attacks. The porosity of the border was often utilised as an operational strategy by republicans for conducting attacks but also for processes of escape afterwards.

For many Protestants, republican violence was viewed and interpreted as a form of intimidation, displacement and for some, outright 'ethnic cleansing' and intimately concerned with land ownership in border regions (Gilmartin 2022; Gilmartin & Browne 2022; Patterson 2013). One participant outlined her perspective:

"Protestant people would have seen the army as a necessary security that needed to be there to protect the Protestant people who were just on the other side because so many were being shot and blew up by the IRA, particularly those who were in the police or the army; we all understood that the IRA were running in and out of towns like Clones."

Much of the rural Protestant population lived on family farms where often their agricultural income was subsidised by part-time membership of the RUC or local British Army regiment, the UDR. One participant eventually joined the UDR to secure the border and surrounding regions:

"When I was growing up... I never took much interest into Troubles or with the border prior to joining the UDR... then people started getting killed and they were saying the attackers came from across the border and it made you more aware of the border; how vulnerable you were if you were close to the border. So we really had no dealings across the border, as a family you know until really I joined the UDR and then you're on these patrols and then we were very much aware of it."

It is therefore important to signpost the diversity of women's attitudes and experiences. For some, the border is a vital form of protection physically and also in terms of securing identity and citizenship. For those from a Protestant background, their agency resided in actively patrolling and securing the border via membership of the RUC or UDR, or in active support for family members who joined either organisation.

For others, the borderlands and its many checkpoints, patrols and presence of republican and loyalist violence, were a form of daily disruption that became normalised. For others, particularly Republican women, their everyday actions were certainly viewed as a form of resistance whereby the border and its panoply of apparatus and resulting impacts were framed as occupation and oppression.

Findings Spotlight 3:
Racial Policing of Women at the Border

The 'border question' on the island of Ireland, deemed to have been solved in the aftermath of the signing of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the strengthening of the Common Travel Area Agreement between the UK and Ireland, which allows for freedom of movement and residence for citizens of both countries in either jurisdiction, was thrown up in question during the Brexit negotiations in the latter half of the last decade (Cochrane, 2020).

While discussions around a potential 'hard border' voiced the concerns of EU migrants living in the islands of Ireland and Great Britain, the experiences of visa-required non-EU migrants predominantly from the Global South were yet again overlooked.

Though not often discussed, a two-tiered cross-border travel agreement is in operation on the island as the privileges of the Common Travel Area Agreement do not extend to non-EU migrants from Global South countries with weaker passports.

Migrant women have continued to experience the UK/Irish border in Ireland as a hard border, and this has had a profound effect on their everyday lives.

3.1 Racialised History of the Common Travel Area Agreement and Current Border-Policing Practices

The Common Travel Area (CTA) was established upon different agreements between 1922 and 1952, that 'influenced the special status of Irish nationals in British law and vice versa' (Ryan, 2001). It acquired prominence only after its endorsement by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. The 'CTA was regarded as a core national interest, especially in the early days, in terms of how Ireland could control immigration by Bolsheviks and displaced persons in continental Europe – as well as the more obvious benefit of being a convenience for Irish people living in the UK' (Meehan 2011, p. 3).

The CTA went through different phases including an initial phase around the 1920s and 1930s when it extended 'freedom of movement, and associated rights of residence, work and voting for the Commonwealth as a whole' (Meehan 2011, p. 3). However, this arrangement between the UK and Ireland rested upon an agreement of having a common list of countries whose nationals would require visas (Meehan, 2011, p. 3).

The Irish Free State's Alien Order 1925 'provided that aliens would not require to leave to enter if they came from Great Britain or Northern Ireland, save where

British authorities had placed a time limit on their stay which had expired, they had entered Britain illegally, or they had been deported or excluded from Britain' (Ryan 2001, p. 857).

This unrestricted movement witnessed changes during the Second World War with both countries favouring controls on movement due to their own set of concerns – 'Britain, primarily out of fear of espionage and subversion' owing to Ireland's neutrality, and Ireland, primarily in order to prevent the influx of refugees' (Ryan, 2001, p. 857). The CTA went through its subsequent phases with minor changes made to the cooperative immigration arrangements between Great Britain and Ireland.

In 1962, however, at the time of both states' applications to the EEC, the UK introduced its first set of restrictions on the right to entry and residence for Commonwealth nationals, without affecting the rights of Irish nationals (Meehan, 2011, p. 5). It is also important to remember that Ireland amended its 1962 Aliens Order to prevent displaced East African Asians from entering the UK through Ireland (Meehan 2011, p. 5).

These 'awkward' set of arrangements would have further effects on the freedom of movement of third-country nationals traveling between the United Kingdom and Ireland. The anxieties around freedom of movement and border policing practices are exemplified by the experiences of cross-border movement by racialised non-nationals.

Part of the contemporary bilateral arrangements for border control include 'Operation Gull' and 'Operation Sonnet', which aim to prevent the border from being used as a 'back door' for migrants to enter Britain or Ireland (Graffin and Blesa, 2019). The implementation of Operation Gull, as an undisclosed set of patchwork practices, has thus been a 'longstanding joint scheme by the UK and Ireland immigration authorities which aims to intercept and remove migrants who use this route illegally' (Commons Library Briefing, 2023, p. 9).

Research by groups such as the Migrant Rights Centre and the North West Migrants Forum, point to the racial profiling of people by immigration officials along the land border and at ferry ports in Northern Ireland. Research and advocacy work done by community groups, NGOs and journalists sheds light on how the CTA is experienced as a 'hidden border' on the island that is neither visible nor experienced by white citizens in either Ireland or Britain.

The operation is known to involve multiple actors, which include the UK Border Agency, Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Police Scotland in the United Kingdom, as well as An Garda Siochana, and the

Garda National Immigration Bureau in the Republic of Ireland (Butterly, 2019). In the Republic of Ireland, 140 people were detained between 2015 and 2017 under the equivalent 'Operation Sonnet' (BrexitLawNI, 2018, p. 22).

Apart from the UK led Operation Gull and Operation Sonnet in the Republic, a UK-wide counterterrorism operation known as 'Operation Bi-Vector' has been used 12,479 times in Northern Ireland by the PSNI, raising concerns around its misuse for routine immigration purposes (Butterly, 2019; BrexitLawNI, 2018). In fact, reports from 2018 suggest that the UK Home Office was planning to set up "stop and search zones" across Northern Ireland's southern land border in a bid to extend the use of Terrorism Act 2000 powers for 'what may be routine immigration purposes' (BrexitLawNI, 2018, p. 23; Rothwell, 2018).

As the BrexitLawNI Policy Report points out, this law could provide for 'anyone to be stopped, searched and detained, without any reasonable grounds or suspicion of any offence, simply in order to check if they are entering or leaving NI' (p. 24). The report further argues that such a law had the potential of creating a hard border by stealth. Reflecting on these different opaque legal tools of bordering, Butterly (2019) points out that 'in any particular stop it is by no means clear which operation is being used'.

Our research found that these bordering practices were directly experienced by migrant women, and they impacted their lives in profound ways. Their experiences outline the challenges of living in the UK/Irish borderlands and straddling these bordering practices while continuing to maintain a sense of optimism through it all.

Some of these experiences revolve around being racially profiled on public transport while traveling north or south of the border, having to constantly self-police one's mobility while living in the borderlands, lack of access to opportunities and restricted access to cross-border health services.

fact that you have been asked when others, this is not, you know..."

Another participant explains that, as a racialised woman, she is more likely to be singled out for passport checks than fellow travellers who are white:

"But let's say we're driving; me and you, another route to Dublin, the police came. Who is likely to be stopped between me and you? It's me because I am different..."

Echoing the experiences of our racialised migrant participants, a white woman from a borderland village in Northern Ireland expressed her discomfort with racial profiling on public transport:

"...the Immigration Garda are like doing illegal profiling on it, where they would stop the bus, pull it over, and anyone who basically doesn't look white, they ask for their ID, their passport. And they take people away as well. Like I have seen them like specifically ask certain people on the bus and then if they didn't have the right thing on them, they would take them off the bus and take them away. Like I found that very disturbing!"

An important part of our research was to explore the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities who live in borderlands and/or those who cross the border regularly for a variety of purposes such as employment. As we were recruiting research participants from Eastern European communities living in the borderlands, a gatekeeper noted that Eastern Europeans have never been stopped or questioned by the gardai at border checks because they are white.

Our research with women in minority communities indicates clear evidence of how the everyday embodiments and practices of the UK/Irish border are underpinned largely by racial profiling and racial policing. For racial and ethnic minority women, the notion of a 'soft border/hard border' is an ethno-centric misnomer and a false dichotomy; for them, the UK/Irish border was and remains a 'hard border'.

3.2 Racial Profiling along the UK/Irish borderlands

We found evidence of racial profiling of women as they crossed the border as part of their daily routines or as they accessed services. A racialised Irish citizen who works in a border town in Northern Ireland spoke about her experience of being racially profiled on public transport on her travels to the south of the border. Although she is not required to carry her passport to prove her citizenship status, she recounted her experience of being profiled on public transport:

"I have been asked to produce ID on the bus before, yes. It hasn't happened that often because I travel at night and because I use my own means and the issue isn't purely just because you are asked, it's always a

3.3 Practices of Self-Policing of the migrant body along the borderlands:

We also found strong evidence of migrant women engaging in self-policing their border movements. The lack of border markings, unpredictability of border checks on buses and trains and the obtuse nature of information pertaining to cross-border travel for non-EU citizens translates into anxiety and hypersensitivity to border mobilities for migrant women.

A migrant woman who moved to Derry in Northern Ireland, located along the border with the County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland, with her husband spoke about the anxieties and their practice of self-policing in navigating the illusive UK/Irish border:

"We love hiking and walking and exploring and cycling so I would say that is one of the things that shows the impact because when you go for you won't see exactly where is the border so you have to check your maps to make sure that you are not crossing it if you don't have a visa."

The lack of clear and accessible information on cross-border travel for non-EU citizens further complicates matters as one woman explains:

"Now, I am Irish and I can cross anytime but my mum's visa is not under the Republic it is under the UK do you understand? So mom lives in [NI town].... And I live in [ROI town], you understand? So mom's visa is reunification under the Irish citizenship and under the Irish citizen, do you get what I mean?...so it is confusing for me if she has a right to live with me you understand or to live in UK."

Furthermore, as highlighted by our participants, the erratic nature of the boundary lines between the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland makes it very difficult to travel from accommodation centres located in the north-west of the country to immigration-related interviews in Dublin without crossing the border.

Should international protection applicants choose to take a direct route it would entail crossing border lines and a risk of deportation. As one participant explained:

"The other choice is 10 hours travelling to Dublin inside Ireland", an impossible feat as applicants are prohibited from leaving accommodation overnight.

"If you leave your accommodation, the government will throw you out in the street and they do not give you another choice or another recommendation at all."

3.4 Racialized Access to Opportunities and Services in the Borderlands:

The Government of Ireland has introduced 'Right to Work' for people seeking asylum, especially after they have been in the country for six months.

However, many asylum seekers find themselves in isolated rural locations that straddle the border, thereby making it difficult for them to access the cross-border labour market otherwise available to Irish and British citizens living in these borderlands. A women seeking asylum in rural Donegal explained:

"... finding a job and moving around is quite difficult especially because we had good educational background back home and good work experience. However, finding jobs [in] this site has been so much of a hassle. My husband currently works however he is not working what he studied for. So it is not in his line of career path and that is obviously demeaning him because he is not, he's growing older and he needs to keep with the experiences for a CV so that is quite a challenge because most of the jobs that are available at the moment are in the north part of the country which is just making things difficult because he does not have the access yet to travel into the north. So he has no other choice too but working jobs that are provided for him, and for me also it is being difficult trying to find employment. So I don't know what the costs may be because the rate of expense is there and I have volunteered with different organisations to try and be within the Irish market and to try and understand exactly what is expected as one person who wanted to work within the Irish community, there are just challenges here and there and there are not enough opportunities "

A migrant woman who has now naturalised as an Irish citizen, mentioned how she could not help a Syrian migrant with counselling services in Arabic despite her qualifications. Recounting her disappointment at the barriers posed by the border, she said:

"Something I dream of to work as a counsellor or to work as a social worker and that is my field and everything and that just vanished because I couldn't do that, so this is one of the border obstacles in my life. I help and support many people who are working over there and I attend many protests, advocacy and movements so it is something that is not easy."

Philip McDermott and Lilian Seenoi-Barr (2017) have spoken about the limits that the border places on social services in their inability to tap into existing skills amongst the migrant community, which resonates with the experiences of our participants.
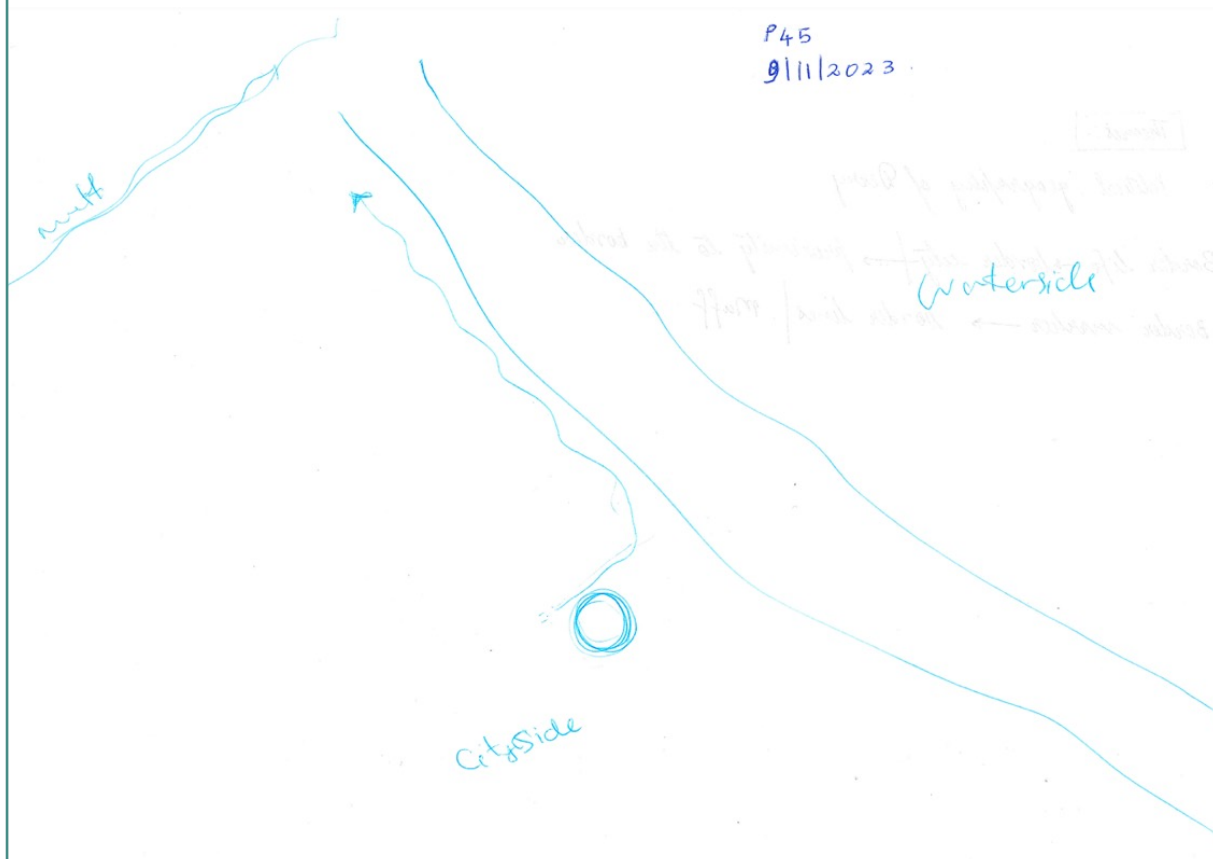
Fig 9. Participant map

3.5 Racialized Access to Healthcare in the borderlands:

Over the last 25 years, Northern Ireland and ROI have had a health partnership through the Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) partnership to reduce waiting lists in each jurisdiction (McGinnity, Laurence and Cunniffe, 2023). However, there are issues that both migrant healthcare service users and service providers face in terms of navigating the border.

In an interview with us, a research participant who works in the medical profession pointed to the experience of her migrant colleagues in the healthcare profession not being able to attend meetings in Dublin. An ESRI report (McGinnity, Laurence and Cunniffe, 2023) highlighted the issue of visa-required family members of migrant patients visiting hospitals particularly when they do not have access to the other jurisdiction.

In fact, asylum seekers and other international protection applicants as a group face particular challenges in accessing cross-border healthcare. For example, a Ukrainian woman, who sought refuge in Ireland after the Russian invasion, account of access to cross-border healthcare sheds light on the experience of a 'hard border':

"...whilst I had to go to the hospital the nurse in that hospital asked if I was Ukrainian if I have a visa, have I got asylum which I do not have and they told me that you are not allowed. And we will communicate with your GP just to make it easier for you in the Republic of Ireland,

Ireland on this territory and I was lucky because I got it in Letterkenny and I didn't have to travel at all, but I got no examination in eight months, eight or nine months."

At times, concessions to healthcare are made on a case-by-case basis. The same participant recalled the experience of another Ukrainian patient who was initially treated in Letterkenny hospital and later transferred to Derry for cancer treatment. However, the participant was not allowed to travel with this patient as a translator.,

These cross-border restrictions directly impact women in their roles as primary carers of children too. The CAJ and ESRI (McGinnity, Laurence and Cunniffe, 2023) have also reported how, in some cases the border has hindered the ability of migrant women resident in the north from accompanying their children to necessary and urgent medical treatment at the island's only acute paediatric hospital located south of the border.

Such experiences demonstrate how there is a de-facto barrier to proper healthcare access for third-country nationals living in the borderlands thereby adversely affecting their health outcomes.

Archive

Women of the Borderlands has created an archive in collaboration with the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)[2]. Through this, we showcase the diverse voices of women in the UK/Irish borderlands as a vital resource for future research and policy. The importance of this archive is to highlight women's voices and experiences, have largely been ignored in research to date. WoBla's archive will unveil these hidden stories by lodging them into a digital archive that will remain for future use.

The material available in the archive consists of 15 transcribed interviews, photos taken during the walking interviews and digitalised maps drawn by participants. We hope to add the remainder in due course. This archive has been created for the women who participated in the research, the general public and researchers interested in the topic. Although most of the content will be available to the public, some will only be available for researchers due to participants' privacy preferences and topic sensitivity.

The information available in this archive has been curated meticulously to ensure participant's privacy. Through a consent form, we have asked participants to choose the type of privacy they want to keep for their testimony. Given the difficulties that come with anonymising, especially for interviews in rural communities, we have been unable to lodge all the interviews.

Some of the issues arising with the anonymisation process has to do with the border conditions, where some testimonies could be identified without proper anonymisation. The border geography was another limiting aspect of this process, as landscape and location are difficult to disguise in order to ensure people's privacy. For now, we have only published those from participants who have waived their anonymity and wanted their interview material to be available to the public Nonetheless, we want to make available all the other testimonies, but this requires care in the detail which demands more time than expected and this exceeds the project's schedule

In order to lodge these testimonies, we have transcribed every interview and completed a deep cleaning of the transcripts to ensure high standards. As part of the process, we have created the metadata for every item; transcripts, photos, and maps. We have also carried out a careful anonymisation, where we have developed a codebook to standardise the codes we use and to keep track of information that has been anonymised or redacted. For example, we have removed sections that participants have asked to be removed or anonymised.

For those participants who decided to go public, we have modified names of other people who are mentioned to respect their privacy. Additionally, and given the nature of the topic, we added a warning by the fact of dealing with sensitive content that includes different forms of violence.

Once the archive goes public, participants, the general public and researchers will be able to access it through the IQDA website by signing in with your name and email address.

Dissemination: social media and website

A key dimension of our work has been to update the public, participants, academics and the wider public about our progress as much as possible. We strived to explain complex and time-consuming academic processes in research collection and dissemination of findings. For this purpose, we created an official website through UCC.

Our website shares the main purpose of the research, team members, and to showcase CONFER (The Cross-border Network for Feminist Research), our spin-out cross-border initiative. Although we try to update it constantly, we have found social media a better way of communicating our constant progress and the importance of this research.

Women of the borderlands has an Instagram account (@Wobla_uk_ireland), where we regularly post about the progress of the research. We have tried to do a weekly post to outline our progress, but also to inform the public about our future outcomes. This has been of great significance to engage with the public outside the academic spaces. Through visual content, we aim to connect with the public and inform about the process involved in doing research.

Similarly, we have also shared this content on our LinkedIn profiles and X, nonetheless, it is through Instagram where we have developed the most relevant engagement. We hope the story of WoBla will remain on Instagram for those who wish to read about our research in the future. We will also publish our findings in academic publications.

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2   'The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) is a central access point for qualitative social science data generated in or about Ireland. The archive frames the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative data within the Irish research community.' (IQDA, 2024)

Fig. 10. The hill behind the house was the site of a big lookout post also referred to as the Golan Heights in the community
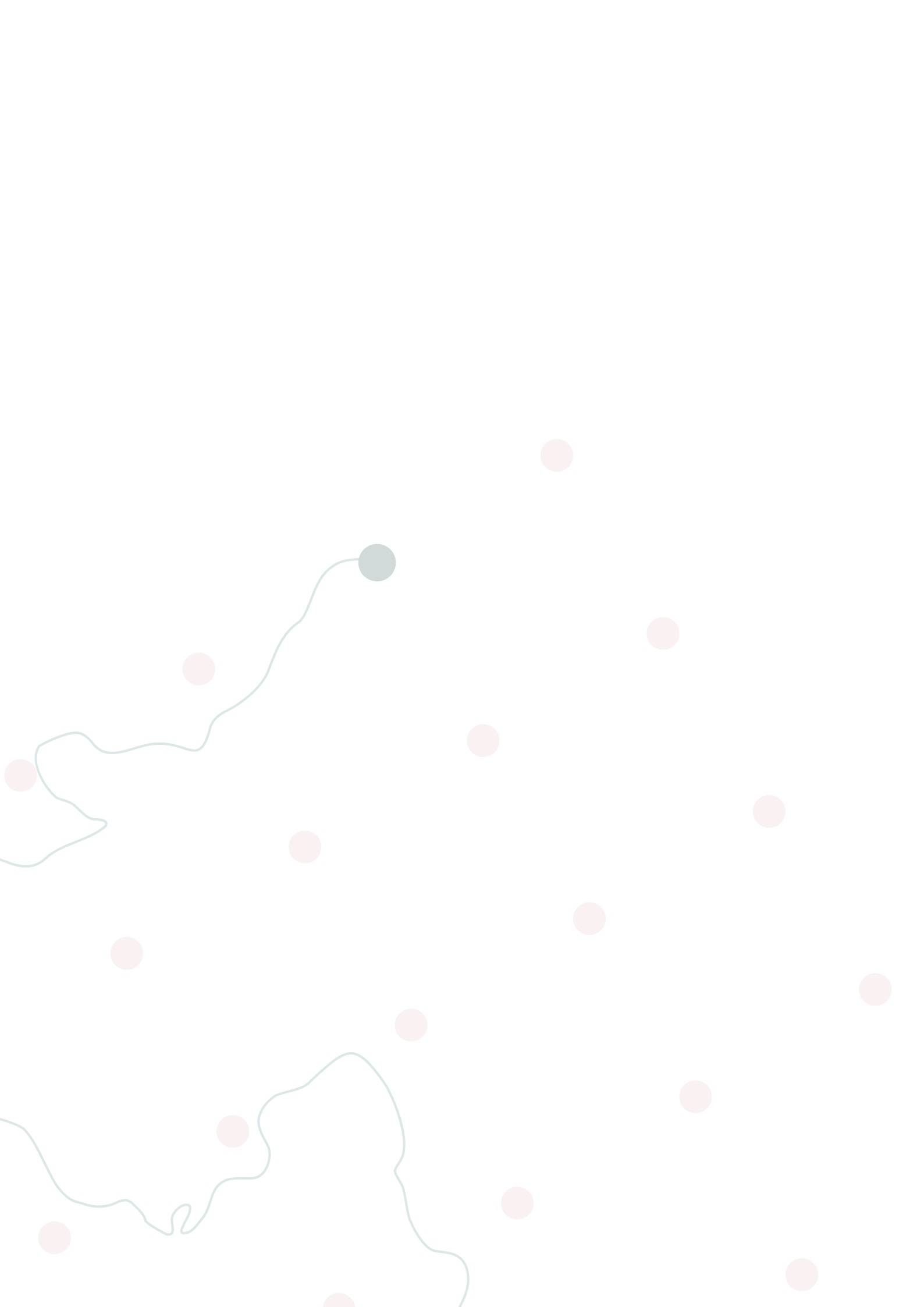
Conclusion and Recommendations

The Women of the Borderlands project sought to explore how the border has shaped the lives of women in communities along its hinterland during the Troubles and since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.
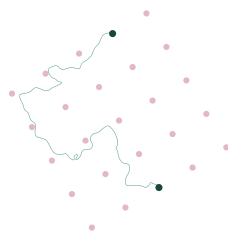
It investigated how women navigated and traversed the border on the island of Ireland as part of everyday life and the extent to which the border regulated women's lives. The findings outlined in this report indicate that women's experiences of the border are diverse, complex and ever-changing. The border remains a structural force for women who reside in border communities and with this in mind we make the following recommendations:

1. The application of a gendered analysis to all aspects of work, employment, poverty, and investment in borderland regions. Policy makers need to recognise and understand the gendered impacts of underinvestment, poverty, and unemployment on women, as well as recognising women's agency and central roles in labour and activism, paid and unpaid.

2. Further trauma-informed research that is guided by a feminist ethic of care is needed to explore gender-based violence in the borderlands. We call on the UK and Irish governments to invest in funding further research in this subject area.

3. An all-island approach to access support services for those who experience gender-based violence is needed. This should include joined up thinking and training in conflict-related gender-based violence for all victim support services in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

4. An extension of the common British-Irish visa scheme to third-country nationals on long-stay visas and residence permits in either jurisdiction, as advocated by migrant organisations and NGOs such as the North West Migrants Forum, Donegal Intercultural Platform and the Committee on Administration and Justice.

Such changes will allow for seamless travel, alleviate existing restrictions around access to cross-border healthcare services and allow for social services to tap into existing skills such as translation services within borderland migrant communities, thereby relieving pressures on an already strained social services sector in the region.

5. Further investigation is needed into the racialised rebordering and policing practices on the island and their impacts on migrant women.

6. Further bilateral government investment and collaboration in community and public services in rural regions that span the border and measures introduced to tackle lack of public transport, poverty, and isolation

7. Widen the definition of conflict-related gender-based violence to include the weaponisation of surveillance and fear as part of the family of violences that work to police women's behaviours.

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Women of the Borderlands

A Walking Biographical Study of Women's Everyday Life on the UK/Irish Border

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