“Living Lives of Quiet Desperation:” Accounts of Gay Men and Lesbians During the Troubles

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On November 14, 2012, Jeff Dudgeon, a well-known gay rights activist from Belfast, gave a speech commemorating the thirty-year anniversary of the decriminalization of homosexual acts in Northern Ireland. Noting his experience of being in the room when the House of Commons voted to extend decriminalization to Northern Ireland, he stated: “It seems odd to me, and presumably odder to most of you who would be younger, that we can go from the threat of life imprisonment in 1982 to high-powered employment protection in 2012, in less than two generations. In my case I went from arrest in 1976 to an award from Her Majesty for services to the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] community in the New Year’s honours list.”

Dudgeon went on to recognize that it was the activism of average people in the gay community that led to decriminalization and noted that they had accomplished it, “with no help from any political party. We did it ourselves.”

Decriminalization was the first step in this wave of change for the gay community. Arguably, without the efforts of those who pushed for a change in the law on homosexuality, the successes of the gay community in Northern Ireland between 1982 and 2012 could not have occurred.

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2 Dudgeon, “30th Anniversary of Decriminalisation NIPSA LGBT Launch Speech.”
In order to appreciate the culture of Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, when homosexual rights activism had its origin, a brief understanding of the history of Northern Ireland is necessary. The centuries-old political and religious conflict in Northern Ireland had created a unique environment in which it was impossible to pass legislation decriminalizing homosexuality without the interference of an international court. Tensions existed between people in Northern Ireland who identified as Irish and those who identified as English. Those Irishmen who sought an independent Ireland (nationalists) and those of English descent who wanted continued union with Britain (unionists) were steadily in conflict with one another. Hostilities continued violently for centuries and culminated in the late twentieth-century with a civil conflict that became known as the Troubles. Paramilitary organizations formed on both the nationalist and unionist communities such as the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the Ulster Defense Association and the Irish Republican Army. From 1968 to the official end of the conflict in 1998, at least 3,700 people were killed as a result of sectarian violence, and at least fifty-three percent of them were civilians.3

I argue that the Troubles affected the people of Northern Ireland by creating a culture in which people were more prejudiced against gay men and lesbians than the rest of the United Kingdom. In this environment of conditioned intolerance, people quickly rejected those who were different from them. Conditioned intolerance would transfer over to areas outside of sectarian conflict. Minority groups, like the gay community, were rejected, hated, and threatened as a result. In addition to creating a culture that celebrated intolerance in the form prejudices against gay men and lesbians, the Troubles distracted the government and people of Northern Ireland so issues of gay and lesbian equality were pushed to the social and political periphery.

Gay men and lesbians faced serious discrimination and violence in Northern Ireland that was enhanced by the conditioned intolerance created by the Troubles. Investigating the experiences of living in Northern Ireland prior to decriminalization provides insight into the attitudes of “the people” of Northern Ireland and their prejudices and preconceived notions about sexuality. The examination of first-hand accounts reveal societal approaches to homosexuality, unique to or exaggerated in Northern Ireland as a result of the Troubles, such as hyper-masculinity, religiosity, and an impulse to curb homosexuality through violence and intimidation. These attitudes created a dangerous and intolerant environment, which excluded and persecuted gay men and lesbians. However, these prejudices did not mean that gay men and lesbians simply hid away or stayed silent. Instead, these strong anti-gay sentiments coming from both nationalists and unionists allowed the gay community to be unified in a way that few other groups in this province, which was ripe with sectarian conflict, could boast. Ultimately, this unity, however imperfect, significantly contributed to the manifestation and the success of the movement for decriminalization.

The Path to Decriminalization of Homosexuality in Northern Ireland

A basic understanding of law in the UK and Northern Ireland pertaining to homosexuality is essential to this essay. The first Parliamentary law criminalizing homosexuality in England was the Buggery Act of 1533, which identified “the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery” and stated that those convicted “shall suffer such pains of death and losses and penalties of their good chattels debts lands tenements and hereditaments as felons.” The punishment for buggery was reduced in 1861 to life imprisonment. The Act exclusively

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criminalized the act of buggery, which led to the introduction of the Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Amendment Act of 1885. This amendment stated, “any male person who, in public or private, commits or is party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour.” A conviction would mean two years imprisonment with the possibility of being sentenced to hard labor in addition. The law put gay people in a position in which others could and did blackmail them for their private actions, thus earning the law the title "blackmailer’s charter." This law was enacted in England but also applied to any area that was under English rule, which included what would later become Northern Ireland.

Through much heated debate and activism, the decriminalization of private homosexual acts was legislated in 1967 in England and Wales and extended to Scotland in 1980. Despite organized activism, and unlike in Scotland, the government in Northern Ireland did not agree to write a bill that similar to the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland raised the prospect in 1976 and asked for the opinions of the people and various organizations, both religious and secular. A report published by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights stated that the majority of people in Northern Ireland would support a change in the law to align with that of England and Wales by decriminalizing homosexual acts. Additionally, when asked how many letters the Secretary of State for Northern

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5Fordham University, “The Law in England, 1290-1885.”
6Leslie Morgan notes several cases of blackmail in her book, The Homosexual(ity) of Law. One particular example was of a two men, identified as “A” and “B” who met on a regular basis to have sex. A disagreement over money led A to report B to the police for “demanding money by menaces.” Instead of an investigation of B, this ultimately led to a conviction of both A and B of committing buggery and no other charges were issued. Leslie Morgan, The Homosexual(ity) of the Law, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 54.
8European Court of Human Rights, Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom (Judgement), no 7525/76, (Strasbourg 1981), 22.
9Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 23
Ireland received on the subject of homosexual law reform in Northern Ireland, he answered that there had been seventy letters between March 1974 and June 1976.\textsuperscript{10} It was clear a significant number of people supported homosexual law reform, but they were up against large, organized, and vocal political and religious opposition.

An attempt to expand decriminalization to Northern Ireland in 1978 was met with antipathy. Several religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, were especially opposed to decriminalization on the grounds that it might send the message to the people that homosexuality would be tolerated or even encouraged.\textsuperscript{11} The Roman Catholic Church made a statement during that process that, “The subject is a particularly sensitive and controversial one. It is reasonable therefore for the law to be less liberal than in England.”\textsuperscript{12} This particular view brings to light the reality that there was something different about how Northern Irish society viewed social issues as compared with England. The statement of the Church could be read to imply that because of the strong connections people had to their religion in Northern Ireland, they were a more socially conservative society. Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) led the most famous opposition campaign, which used the slogan “Save Ulster From Sodomy.” Through this campaign, the DUP started a petition proclaiming that no alterations should be made to the law on homosexual acts without the support of the electors of Northern Ireland and proclaimed that such a change would “bring God’s curse down on our people.”\textsuperscript{13} This campaign was able to gain 70,000 signatures.\textsuperscript{14} Clearly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] United Kingdom, \textit{Hansard Parliamentary Debates (HC)}. 5\textsuperscript{th} ser., vol. 914 (June 30, 1976), col. 195W.
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legal reform was not easily accepted in Northern Ireland, and in the case of the “Save Ulster From Sodomy” campaign, religion played a major role in opposition.

Further, the violence of the sectarian conflict made many people within Northern Ireland believe that homosexual law reform was not a pertinent or important issue. One opinion piece in the Irish Times made light of Paisley’s opposition to decriminalization when referred to the opposition campaign as “divert[ing] public attention from more serious issues by staging a hetero-homo smuggling match,” and stated that the real goal should be to get the people of Northern Ireland to pay attention to the “real problems” facing the country.\(^\text{15}\) This opinion piece demonstrated that at least a part of the community was dismissive toward the issue of decriminalization; the movement for decriminalization had difficulty gaining traction in a community so focused on the Troubles. This opinion was echoed within the parliamentary debate as well by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in 1976 when he explained, “I cannot say that this is the most important problem in their [the people in Northern Ireland] minds.”\(^\text{16}\) The Secretary of State appeared to be alluding to the Troubles and the fact that the conflict consumed the minds of the people in Northern Ireland. This distraction likely played a significant role in the delay of decriminalization in Northern Ireland.

The groups most supportive of reform were those specifically dedicated to representing homosexuals and social work organizations, but the General Synod of the Church of Ireland also issued limited support. The Church held the belief that gay sex should not be a matter for legal punishment, despite the fact that it was considered morally wrong.\(^\text{17}\) Any form of religious support within Northern Ireland was important due to the intensely religious nature of the area.

\(^\text{17}\) *Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom*, 25.
However, even with this support, homosexual law reform collapsed due to the claim that the Northern Irish public and government were far too divided on the issue even though the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights in Northern Ireland published a statement that resistance to decriminalization was being exaggerated and continued to advise a change in the law. Additionally, the same argument that had persisted in Scotland was present in Northern Ireland: because the judicial system did not actually prosecute people for private homosexual acts, there was no need for decriminalization.

While this debate raged on, the law was indeed being carried out, and gay men were being prosecuted. On 13 October 1967, a story was printed in the *Belfast Telegraph* of a 66-year-old man being sentenced to fifteen months in prison for having “played a major part in a series of homosexual offences in Bangor and Belfast.” The article reported that seven men were charged for buggery or gross indecency with sentences as long as eighteen months long. At least one of the men was sentenced to “hospital treatment,” presumably in the form of conversion therapy.

Dudgeon served an important role in proving that the law was indeed being prosecuted. Dudgeon, who had co-founded NIGRA, was a leader within the Committee for Homosexual Law Reform, which was in the process of attempting to take the case for decriminalization to the European Court of Human Rights. He had also founded the organization Cara-Friend in 1974, which was established “as a voluntary counseling, befriending, information, and social space

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18 *Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom*, 23.
21 Conversion therapy, also known as reparative therapy or less formally as a gay cure, has been proven to be ineffective and often harmful to its subjects. One of the main defenders of conversion therapy, Dr. Robert Spitzer, who published a study in 2003 supporting the practice, came out in May 2012 with a statement apologizing to the LGBT community and admitting that the therapy was “a serious threat to the health and well-being — even the lives — of affected people.” (New York Times 5/19/2012) More information on conversion therapy can be found here: APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2009).
organization for the LGBT community” in Northern Ireland. In 1976 the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) found the list of volunteers for Cara-Friend during a raid on a member’s home and began to investigate all of the volunteers. This raid was a part of a larger search of the homes of all of the men known to be involved in campaigning for homosexual law reform. Ultimately, twenty-three gay men were arrested in these raids, including Dudgeon. In the investigation of Dudgeon’s home, the RUC seized his private diary and letters, which divulged into his private life and made mention of his homosexuality. The police therefore kept his diary and writings for close to a year to “investigate” homosexual acts. These arrests were soon revealed to be serendipitous, because in proving that prosecutions against men for private gay sex, they convinced the European Court of Human Rights to hear Dudgeon’s case.

In his petition to the European Court of Human Rights lodged with the Commission on 22 May 1976, Mr. Dudgeon claimed that, “the existence, in the criminal law in force in Northern Ireland, of various offences capable of relating to male homosexual conduct and the police investigation in January 1976 constituted an unjustified interference with his right to respect for his private life, in breach of Article 8 (art. 8) of the Convention” and that “he had suffered discrimination, within the meaning of Article 14 (art. 14) of the Convention, on grounds of sex, sexuality and residence.” He also claimed that he had been subject to “fear, suffering, and psychological stress” as a result of the mere existence of the law.

The Northern Irish Government argued that it had not violated the European Convention of Human Rights. Article Eight of the Convention stipulated that there were exceptions to the right to privacy if the violation was “in accordance with the law” and deemed “necessary in a

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23 Goldhaber, 36.
24 Jeffery-Poulter, 148.
25 Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 34-35.
26 Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 37.
democratic society” to protect the public.  

The Northern Irish government claimed that the law was necessary based on the exceptional nature of Northern Ireland as the written decision noted:

In the first place, the Government drew attention to what they described as profound differences of attitude and public opinion between Northern Ireland and Great Britain in relation to questions of morality. Northern Irish society was said to be more conservative and to place greater emphasis on religious factors, as was illustrated by more restrictive laws even in the field of heterosexual conduct.

The European Court of Human Rights came to the decision that the Government of Northern Ireland had indeed violated Article Eight of the Convention and denied the validity of the government's defense. It explained:

As compared with the era when that legislation was enacted, there is now a better understanding, and in consequence an increased tolerance, of homosexual behaviour to the extent that in the great majority of the member States of the Council of Europe it is no longer considered to be necessary or appropriate to treat homosexual practices of the kind now in question as in themselves a matter to which the sanctions of the criminal law should be applied.

The Court also decided that it was irrelevant whether or not Article Fourteen had been violated and did not discuss the matter. By dismissing the point about being discriminated against biases based on sexuality, the Court lost a major opportunity to ensure that the rights of gay men and lesbians were not violated. However, despite the imperfections of the decision, the government of Northern Ireland was put under significant pressure to pass a law decriminalizing homosexual acts.

Even so, opposition to decriminalization in Northern Ireland continued, led by Ian Paisley. After the decision, the opposition based its objections on the idea that the Northern Irish government was not required to answer to any European power. Additionally, Paisley expressed frustration over the fact the Catholic and Protestants had finally found common

27 Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 42.

28 Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 56.

29 Case of Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom, 60.

30 Golbaher, 39.
ground over promoting the anti-gay legislation and now were moving forward to pass decriminalization.\footnote{Jeffery-Poulter, 153.} Despite the opposition’s best efforts, the Homosexual Offences Act of 1982 was passed decriminalizing private homosexual acts in Northern Ireland through the efforts of Jeff Dudgeon and the grassroots support of organizations like the Committee for Homosexual Law Reform and NIGRA.

Achieving decriminalization in Northern Ireland was, of course, a major win for human rights; however, as was the case in the rest of the United Kingdom, there were limitations to the reform. The age of consent for gay sex was set at twenty-one as opposed to the age of sixteen for heterosexual sex. The double standard spoke volumes about the existing prejudice that surrounded the issue of homosexuality. Throughout the debates on decriminalization there had been significant discussion about the supposed predatory nature of gay men. This difference in age of consent demonstrated how seriously that belief was taken. Additionally, it demonstrated that despite decriminalization, the idea that people needed to be protected from homosexuals had survived. Another limitation was that, as was the case elsewhere on the British Isles, decriminalization did not apply on merchant ships. Further, under separate legal code, the armed forces were still able to prosecute people for their private gay sex.\footnote{United Kingdom, Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982, no 1536 (N.I. 19), accessed August 23, 2013, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1982/1536.}

Allowing limitations to decriminalization undercut any capacity the bill may have had to change society perceptions of the LGBT community. This sent the message to the Northern Irish people that the establishment still believed homosexuality to be condemnable. This message was strengthened by the fact that the measure had been put into place because an outside force pressured government. The message to gay men was clear: stay in the closet.
It should be noted that homosexual acts between women were not outlawed in any of the aforementioned laws. However, that is not to say that homosexuality between women was in any way considered acceptable. The Wolfenden Report in 1957, which recommended that homosexual acts between men be decriminalized, addressed “lesbian behavior” alongside “fornication” and adultery as an example of behaviors that were neither condoned nor approved of, but were not criminal under the law.\(^{33}\) The insinuation was that homosexual acts between men should be considered in the same way – as private, immoral decisions. As early as 1937, a debate in the House of Lords over a marriage bill led to a statement that men should be protected from lesbians in the same way that women should be protected from gay men.\(^{34}\) In 1957 an MP from Liverpool stated, “I have never been able to understand why there is a rather fierce law for the male pervert and not for the lesbian.”\(^{35}\) Clearly, despite the lack of laws forbidding homosexual acts between women, institutionalization of prejudice against gay women did exist. Even so, that prejudice did not lead to any legal action being taken against lesbians, likely because women, even homosexual ones, were seen as less of a threat than men. Additionally, some remnant of the belief that women were passionless or incapable of sexual passion may have survived from the Victorian period.\(^{36}\) All of this meant that lesbian women faced many of the same preconceptions and prejudices that were faced by gay men, but without the fear that they might go to prison for any of their actions with other women.

As was the case in England, Wales, and Scotland, the government and religious groups in Northern Ireland resisted homosexual law reform for as long as possible. However, in every case


\(^{34}\) United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates (HL), 5\(^{th}\) ser., vol. 106 (July 7, 1937), col. 145.

\(^{35}\) United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates (HC), 5\(^{th}\) ser., vol. 566 (March 13, 1937), col. 1166.

\(^{36}\) To learn more about the myth of passionless women, see Nancy F. Cott, “Passionless: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” Signs 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1978): 219-36.
except that of Northern Ireland, domestic societal pressure eventually resulted in decriminalization. Social activism was clearly present in Northern Ireland, yet was not enough to push the government to change the law. The reality of the Troubles meant that people were distracted from social issues such as LGBT rights as was demonstrated by the dismissive attention that homosexual law reform received in the press. However, political and religious resistance could not stop change from occurring. Despite popular belief, the people of Northern Ireland were capable of focusing on issues other than the sectarian conflict, as was demonstrated by the time and effort that proponents and opponents of decriminalization put into their campaigns. Societal attitudes in Northern Ireland differed from those of the rest of the United Kingdom in a way that was even less tolerant of homosexuality and that difference created the situation in which the European Court of Human Rights needed to interfere in order to ensure that the rights of gay men to privacy were not being violated.

First Hand Accounts of Intolerance and Their Themes

All of the personal accounts referenced in this essay document the unique and personal experiences of various gay men and lesbians in Northern Ireland. The sources represent the recollections of a total of 35 people, 16 lesbians and 19 gay men. Of course, this is a very limited number out of the many of gay men and lesbians who lived in Northern Ireland. Even so, this small number of sources represents a diverse sampling of non-heterosexual society. Although many of the interviewees chose to remain anonymous, it was often possible to discern affiliations with certain religious or political groups, professions, and locations from their comments. The relatively wide range of variances between those people included allows for the
closest possible representation of what gay men and lesbians experienced in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s.

Through the process of examining the testimonies of gay men and lesbians who lived in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, I discovered several recurring themes. I identified these themes with terms that may or may not have been mentioned by those who provided testimony and that provide an accurate description for the topics discussed. These themes include: isolation and secrecy, episodes of violence and harassment, experiences of hyper-masculinity, religiosity, sectarianism, and a response of political activism. Narratives that mentioned people hiding their sexuality and/or isolating themselves from broader society demonstrate the theme of isolation and secrecy. I classified mentions of the experience or fear of violence, intimidation, or harassment as episodes of violence and harassment. The category of experiences of hyper-masculinity includes narratives discussing the exaggerated ideals of manhood in Northern Ireland, much in the way that accounts of the heightened importance of religion in Northern Ireland as compared to the rest of the UK indicate the theme of religiosity. Personal stories about the how the sectarian conflict of the Troubles affected gay men and lesbians and the gay community constitute another theme. Finally, response to the prejudice faced by gay men and lesbians of social and political activism emerged as a theme throughout the stories. In order to be considered a theme for the purposes of this essay, a subject had to be commented upon by at least six different people at length. Often, overlap between themes existed. For example, if a person discussed being harassed or attacked, his or her comment was included the category of episodes of violence and harassment.
**Isolation and secrecy**

A significant number of people interviewed made references to feeling the need to hide their homosexuality or to the fact that they felt they were living in a closeted society when it came to homosexuality. One woman, Smythie, described her experience with this issue and explained, “Sometimes it’s touch and go; you play it as you see it, and if you’ve been gay for a long time you’ll know what I mean. You’ll know when and where to say it and when to keep your mouth shut.”

The narrative evidence of a fear of being blackmailed by being revealed as a homosexual to the police demonstrates the reality and commonality of this apprehension. Often times, the belief that hiding their sexuality was necessary meant that people were less likely to socialize with their co-workers, neighbors, and other acquaintances in their lives.

One interviewee focused on this tendency not to interact with people outside of those who knew about and accepted his sexual orientation by stating that homosexual people were restricted in their social lives to only people within the “gay scene,” which created what he referred to as an “inverted effect.” Another man mentioned that this life of isolation meant gay men and lesbians were “living lives of quiet desperation.” Most people were not happy with being forced to stifle aspects of their personalities but were in a situation in which they could do nothing to combat it without putting themselves at risk of prosecution or worse. For example, Mark, a gay man, explained, “At the back of your mind there’s that small but severe risk that I could be targeted. If it’s found out, how likely are you to get bricks through the window, petrol poured through the letterbox, or stoned, or your car vandalized? How are you supposed to sleep

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37 Interview of Smythie,” as quoted in Marian Duggan, *Queering Conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland,* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 42.  
39 O’Doherty, "Celebrating 30 Years."
at night, when you’re thinking that there could be people out there targeting my house, putting petrol in the letterbox to burn me out?” ⁴⁰ For people like Mark, it was clear that being honest about their personalities was a risk they were not willing to take, as they believed the consequences could be severe.

The gay community and especially gay men were already marginalized due to the fact that gay sex was illegal. As demonstrated by these testimonies, gay men and lesbians recognized that they were not accepted within Northern Ireland’s hetero-sexist, homophobic society and therefore secluded themselves from that environment. Pat, a gay man, commented, “There was a tremendous loneliness that went right through with me from primary school until I finally came out.”⁴¹

Additionally, a few people commented on the fact that hiding their sexuality caused a negative effect on their mental health. Nuala expanded on this idea when she noted “For years I denied it, even on my parent’s deathbeds, and that’s where my problems stem from. I’ve had to have a lot of counseling. I know now that my problems aren’t because I’m lesbian, but because I’ve been made to deny it for so long: to myself, to my family, I’ve had to deny it to everyone. How can that not mess a person up?”⁴² One woman, Carmel, commented on her belief that this issue was even greater for women because they might not have the ability to relocate like their male counterparts:

> It’s easier for [women] to remain silent and invisible and it’s still a big problem in Northern Ireland. A lot of women may fear hurting someone in their family, or that they’ll disappoint them, or [the family member] will think they’ve done something wrong…. That’s very damaging and it does have an impact on people’s mental health because you have to make a choice whether to be visible or not and be prepared to deal with what follows.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Interview of Mark,” as quoted in Duggan, 43.
⁴¹ “Interview of Pat,” as quoted in Duggan, 127.
⁴² “Interview of Nuala,” as quoted in Duggan, 128.
⁴³ “Interview of Carmel,” as quoted in Duggan, 128.
Conversely, this isolation in combination with the situation created by the violence of the Troubles allowed a unique sense of unity and safety in the gay community. Duggan delved into this topic by describing the way that members of the gay community exploited their rejection from heterosexual social scenes and the effect that the violence of the Troubles had on people’s social lives across Northern Ireland. In her book, she described how during the heightened violence in the 1960s and 1970s in Northern Ireland, the city center of Belfast was often abandoned in the evenings with the exception of troops stationed there for security purposes. Many of the people she interviewed for her book explained that this very negative situation allowed for a positive effect on the gay community. Jane, a lesbian who lived in Belfast during the Troubles described this experience: “Everything in Belfast shut in the evening as people went home to the safety of their communities. The inner bit of the city was ringed off and the Army searched you when you went through. The town was empty most nights save for the Army and those on their way to the gay disco.” Jane’s experience was corroborated by the narratives of others, like Mack, who noted, “On those days you can’t believe just how empty the city was…. I’d met Rob [his partner]…and I kissed him on the mouth outside the City Hall, and the reason I could do that was there was no-one, nothing the whole length of Donegal Avenue – that’s how empty it really was. So the chances of getting beaten up were very little.” The emptiness of downtown Belfast meant that not only had gay men and lesbians found a place to meet with one another, but also they were able to be themselves without the fear of being noticed by heterosexist or homophobic people or groups. In a way, this could be seen as a liberating environment for gay men and lesbians. They carved out an area in society in which they could be completely themselves including being honest about their homosexuality with little fear of retaliation or

44 Duggan, 58.
45 “Interview of Jane,” as quoted in Duggan, 60.
46 “Interview of Mack,” as quoted in Duggan, 59.
blackmail, which was clearly very rare in a society in which gay sex was illegal and considered immoral.

*Episodes of fear of violence and harassment*

Counterbalancing the fact that gay men and women had found a physical space to gather due to the fact that the rest of society was afraid to go out in the city center of Belfast during the 1970s, the fear of harassment and brutality from those who were morally opposed to homosexuality was an omnipresent concern for the Belfast LGBT community. Violence was a very real part of life for people living in Northern Ireland during the Troubles with sectarian groups regularly carrying out brutal exchanges. For Northern Irish gay men and lesbians, the danger of harassment or violence was even stronger. During the 1960s and 1970s, no studies were done on homophobic crime or brutality. The first study of this kind was carried out in 1996 and focused on whether or not gay men and lesbians had experienced any form of homophobic violence or harassment during their lifetime. The results indicated that thirty-nine percent of respondents had experienced homophobic violence, thirty-six percent experienced homophobic harassment, and sixty-seven percent had been verbally abused.\(^47\) As the study was done during the 1990s, many of the people who were included in the research might have been around and experienced homophobic brutality during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the study does not include information on when a person experienced this violence, noting only that it occurred during his or her lifetime. Even so, based on the personal narratives of lesbians and gay men who lived through the period being discussed, it can be deduced that this trend did not simply begin in the 1990s, but rather was continued from much earlier, including the 1960s and 1970s.

A significant number of people in the interviews expressed that they feared being discovered as a lesbian or gay man because of the threat of homophobic violence and harassment that they faced. As people were killing and attacking people from the opposite side of the religious, political, and ethnic barrier, it seemed logical that this could easily be extended to attacking people of a different sexuality. For example Colette stated, “I do think there is a legacy there; there’s something about having lived through a violent conflict and the toleration of violence which that involves... I just think that these attitudes are partly a product of the way that we are structured.” Another woman, Mary, commented similarly, “I think some people see themselves as having a right to hostility given the history we have here.” These accounts draw attention to the unique culture in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s in which violence was often the first step in dealing with differences.

Some feared being noticed after leaving the gay bars that had become safe havens for gay men and lesbians. One woman, Jane, was used to this fear and noted, “Sometimes after the discos you’d feel pretty unsafe if you weren’t heading on somewhere else. The streets were deserted, funnily enough because of all the ongoing violence, but that didn’t always make you feel safe if you thought they knew it was [the gay bar] you were heading from.” Other interviewees noted this same fear, such as Antonia who stated in the anthology Threads that she felt “distinctly unsafe on the streets after the Disco.” Of course, as Jane mentioned, there was always danger in walking the streets of Belfast due to the “ongoing violence”; however, the fact that they both noted a specific fear due to the fact that they was leaving the gay bar implied that

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48 “Interview of Colette,” as quoted in Duggan, 38.
49 “Interview of Mary,” as quoted in Duggan, 38.
50 “Interview of Jane,” as quoted in Duggan, 61.
51 “Interview of Antonia from Threads” as quoted in Duggan, 61.
the threat of homophobic violence also existed. Likely this fear was of members of the paramilitary organizations as they were the groups that were terrorizing the streets at night.

Fear of violence was not only present within the city though. One woman, Jennifer, who lived in a rural area received threats against her for planning events for the gay community. She explained, “I’ve heard from several other rural groups…advertise too much and you could end up with twenty or forty people outside with placards and the like. Or petrol bombed, I’ve heard that too. Some years ago, a group was getting started and they ended up being threatened with having the [place] petrol bombed.”\(^5^2\) Although this is only one example, it clarifies that homophobic violence and harassment was not limited to the streets of cities; it instead occurred throughout Northern Ireland. This meant that responding to homophobic and hetero-sexist ideals with violence was ingrained in Northern Irish society.

These fears were based on particular acts of serious violence that had been carried out against homosexuals in Northern Ireland, including several murders. Dudgeon touched on several of these cases in his correspondence with those who held records on these murders, such as the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In one email to the PSNI Historical Enquiries Team, Dudgeon addressed the murder of Fredrick Davis in 1973. Davis was a Protestant man who the PSNI believed had been murdered by a “non-specific Republican group.”\(^5^3\) The PSNI acknowledged Davis’s death to have been connected to sectarian violence due to this fact. According to Dudgeon, who was writing on behalf of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association, “anti-gay elements” in addition to sectarianism played a role in this murder.\(^5^4\) As no one had been convicted for the murder,

\(^5^2\) “Interview of Jennifer,” as quoted in Duggan, 44.
\(^5^4\) Dudgeon, “E-mail Message to PSNI Historical Enquiries Team.”
Dudgeon wrote in 2006 to learn if the PSNI would be reopening the case. In this same email, Dudgeon referenced at least one other murder believed to be the result of sectarianism and anti-gay activity as well as another murder, which was believed to have no connection to sectarianism, only homophobia. A member of the Historical Enquiries Team responded to Dudgeon and agreed to keep him informed of any progress made in the case, which signaled that they believed that Dudgeon’s opinion that the incidents were related to homophobia was justified.

In 2011, an investigating officer on the Historical Enquiries Team emailed Dudgeon about the murder of Thomas McKenzie in 1976 in order to request his aid with “some history of problems faced in Belfast in the mid 1970’s by the gay community,” and how that might help them in solving McKenzie’s Case.\(^5\) The fact that the Historical Enquiries Team made an effort to seek out Dudgeon further demonstrated their confidence in his belief that these cases were motivated by homophobia. The officer in these exchanges considered the possibility that the motive for McKenzie’s murder had been anti-gay, based on the fact that he was known to be homosexual. Judging by the fears of the gay men and lesbians mentioned above, it could be assumed that people within the gay community were aware that this type of violence was being carried out against gay men and women. Additionally, the fact that these cases were being analyzed in the 2000s indicated that they were not being thoroughly investigated in the 1970s. There are several possible explanations for this. Likely, this was due to either a conscious effort on the part of policing forces in Northern Ireland not to investigate these hate crimes with sufficient care because of their own homophobia or an indifference to sexuality-based hate

crimes. Additionally, it remains logical that gay men and lesbians were not willing to report these crimes for fear of being prosecuted for taking part in gay sex.

The lack of investigations should have come as no surprise, as gay men and lesbians also faced harassment from the forces that were supposed to be protecting them from violence on the streets. For example, the RUC spent a significant amount of time raiding gay bars – to the point where it crossed the line of simply being a security procedure to being an exercise in intimidation. Mary, a woman who frequented the gay bars explained:

Aye, the disco was frequently interrupted by the RUC. They’d come in and they’d turn on all the lights so they could get a good look at you. Some of us were used to that, but for some of the newer ones it was always a bit nerve-racking so you really felt for them, you know? It was just intimidation; we were hardly a threat compared to what they were really stationed there for.56

The RUC sent a clear message to gay men and lesbians of Northern Ireland: they knew who was gay, and they could use that information to harass and possible arrest these people if they felt the need. The threat was always looming.

Some of those interviewed saw this scare tactic used by the RUC as a way of masking their own insecurities in terms of their ineffectiveness when it came to policing sectarian violence, and Duggan agreed with this assessment.57 The authorities were not capable of controlling the paramilitary groups, and therefore found another way to occupy their time. As one man, James, put it, “Most gay people were amazed; people were getting arms and legs blown off and the police still found time to harass gay people.”58 Another man, Rob, echoed this sentiment when he noted:

[The police] would be chasing us rather than the IRA, because we were easy targets. They’d go on about how they’d need all the manpower they could get to chase the criminals yet they’d still have police officers at toilets and things like that, just in case a guy got his dick out or something like that. And you’d think, ‘There are more important things going on in Ulster than this!’ But we just seemed to be easy targets at the time I suppose.59

56 “Interview of Mary,” as quoted in Duggan, 62.
57 Duggan, 63.
58 “Interview of James,” as quoted in Duggan, 63.
59 “Interview of Rob,” as quoted in Duggan, 64.
James and Rob’s assessment about the insecurity of the RUC and other policing forces was based on the fact that the security forces were powerless against paramilitary violence. They were unable to police the paramilitary groups, which they were supposed to be controlling, so they harassed the group they saw as weak and powerless to defend themselves. Legislation stating that gay sex was a criminal offence served the purpose of creating an outlet for government sanctioned harassment of gay men and lesbians, especially those gay males who were specifically implicated by the law.

*Hyper-masculinity*

Another theme was a sense of hyper-masculinity on the part of heterosexual men in Northern Ireland, especially within paramilitary organizations, which led to discrimination against gay men or a tendency to stereotype them as effeminate. These testimonies prove that this attitude was not only present within the paramilitary organizations but that they had permeated into broader society.

The permeation contributed to assumptions being drawn about an individual’s lifestyle based upon societal expectations of hyper-masculinity. For example, this theme came through in the interview of one man who described his experience of having assumptions made about him based on his lifestyle. He explained in his interview for the Rainbow Project how his co-workers assumed that he must be gay due to the fact that he was a grown man and still living with his mother.60 The implication of this assumption was that he was not providing a home for himself – something typically prescribed as the responsibility of a man – and therefore was not living up to societal norms of how a man should behave. The resulting assumption was that he must be a

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60 O’Doherty, “Celebrating 30 Years.”
homosexual. This example exemplified how this attitude was present even in the safest or most benign environments.

Another example of how hyper-masculinity affected gay men actually came through in how some gay men who denied their homosexuality treated other men who were “out.” James commented on the harassment he received from such men when he explained, “The people who gave me the worst abuse, both physical and verbal, were people who I know were closet gays or bisexuals. What they were doing was trying to cover their own tracks. These people ... were so called happily married family men. It’s a front.”61 The experience that James described revealed how some gay men who were attempting to adhere to the typical Northern Irish ideals of masculinity made extra effort to lash out at those who did not make the same effort. In this situation, it is likely that insecurity about their own masculinity led these men to be cruel to men who were openly gay. This kind of lashing out can be attributed to internalization of homophobic beliefs.62

A man interviewed for Reilly, Muldoon, and Byrne’s article touched on the issues of homophobia and masculinity when he discussed why he took part in violence during the Troubles. He explained, “People will think you’re a ‘poof’ if you try to talk your way out of something.”63 This statement is unique because it represented the attitude of heterosexuals involved in the conflict toward the idea of homosexuality. To attempt to talk instead of resorting to violence was not considered the proper manly way to respond. The perception of being considered a “poof” created an environment where men compensated with violence to dispel suspicion, real or imagined, of their homosexuality. The possibility that people might believe that

61 “Interview of James,” as quoted in Duggan, 120.
a person was gay for acting non-aggressively was enough to persuade people to act violently, which spoke volumes about their attitude toward homosexuality.

One man, who worked for both the RUC and the PSNI and chose to remain anonymous, mentioned how the RUC would crowd around the gay bars and discos and in order to laugh at the “freak show” and the “queers.” He mentioned that this was a relatively common occurrence as a source of entertainment. The idea that watching the average occurrences of a gay bar might be comparable to watching a “freak show” demonstrated that homosexuality was considered beyond the pale of normalcy. For these police officers, observing men who did not match their ideal of masculinity was a spectacle and something to be ridiculed. This relates back to the idea that the police forces were unable to accomplish their assigned task of regulating the paramilitary forces. Instead, perhaps as an effort to define their own masculinity in the absence of having the ability of protecting the Northern Irish public, they chose to deride those who they believed to be effeminate.

Religiosity

As has been mentioned previously, the majority of people in Northern Ireland strongly identified with their religious denominations. Even though many of these identifications were more social and/or political than they were theological, to a significant degree, the morality of the people of Northern Ireland was shaped by religion. According to the Continuous Household Survey of 1988-1991, as noted by Karen Lysaght, ninety-one percent of Northern Irish people identified themselves with a religious denomination compared with fifty-eight percent of people

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64 “Interview of Connor,” as quoted in Duggan, 63.
in the rest of the United Kingdom. According to the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) website, which details information about conflict in Northern Ireland, in 1991 more than fifty percent of people attended church in Northern Ireland as opposed to only fifteen percent in the rest of the United Kingdom. Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, was generally not accepting of homosexuality, which created a hostile environment for gay men and lesbians in Northern Ireland. A major theme that shone through in these personal recollections was the important role that religion and religiosity played in creating a homophobic Northern Ireland.

One man, when reflecting the rejection that the gay community faced, mentioned that he was not surprised by the negative treatment based on the “religious fervor” that was present in Northern Ireland. He went on to remark that it was exactly this fervor that he believed was responsible for Northern Ireland being “behind the times compared to the U.K. in general,” in terms of enacting legislation decriminalization homosexuality.

For a number of the gay men and lesbians, the religious attitudes even pervaded their own interpretation of homosexuality. One man explained:

Somehow you learnt that the sin that you are a homosexual was the worst sin in the book. You heard this quite often from the pulpit about the abomination and the evil and all that and you’d know that on some subconscious level people were taking that in and not really thinking about it at the time, but it was powerful stuff you know? It certainly stuck with me for obvious reasons. Another man recounted having a similar experience of internalizing the ideas that religion had taught him about the immorality of homosexuality. He described going to gay bars in England and observing two men kissing in public and how his first response was to be disgusted until he

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67 O’Doherty, "Celebrating 30 Years."

68 Quoted in Duggan, Queering Conflict, 82.
realized that this was exactly how he believed things should be.69 A 2009 Study by the National Institutes of Health Public Access identified that LGBT people who were brought up in religious (Christian) environments and heard repeated messages about the immorality of homosexuality internalized these ideas, which was often detrimental to their mental health.70 This was exactly what the man above described. Religious ideas about homosexuality were so deeply embedded in Northern Irish culture that gay men and lesbians could not always reject them on a subconscious level.

Clearly, the strong connection that people within Northern Ireland had to their religion played a major role in the challenges that gay men and lesbians faced with coming out and being accepted. The law against homosexual acts seemed much less harsh and surprising when it is acknowledged that the majority of people in Northern Ireland believed in the immorality of the acts due to their strong religious beliefs.

For the gay community in Northern Ireland, it is not surprising that sectarianism was a topic often discussed. A significant amount of debate has surrounded the question of whether the gay community divided along the same ethno-political lines as the rest of Northern Ireland.71 This debate points to another question of whether Catholics or Protestants in Northern Ireland demonstrated less intolerance toward homosexuality. In her discussion of this topic, Duggan cited a Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, which demonstrates that in contemporary Northern Ireland, the Catholic community is more accepting. The Northern Ireland Life Times (NILT) began collecting surveys on various social and cultural topics, and in 1998 the question, “Are sexual relations between adults of the same sex wrong?” was included in these surveys.

69 Quoted in Duggan, *Queering Conflict*, 84.
70 Katrina Kubicek et al, “‘God Made me Gay for a Reason’: Young Men Who have Sex with Men’s Resiliency in Resolving Internalized Homophobia from Religious Sources,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 24, No. 5 (September 2009): 613.
71 Duggan, 65-68.
The results were split up based on the religious denomination of those answering. The results from 1998-2008 demonstrated that a larger proportion of Protestants (1998: sixty-seven percent, 2004: fifty-six percent, 2008: fifty-eight percent) consistently answered, “Always wrong” than Catholics did (1998: fifty percent, 2004: thirty-two percent, 2008: thirty-one percent). If it could be assumed that this data was representative of data in the 1960s and 1970s, then the assumption would be that Catholics were more tolerant of homosexuality than Protestants. However, no similar data exists for that time period, and the question is therefore left unanswered. For the purposes of this study of lived experiences, interpreting the debate over whether or not the gay community was affected by sectarianism relies on the recollections of those interviewed on the topic.

Dudgeon, who played such a large role in the movement for decriminalization, believed that the gay community had created a unique space in which sectarianism played no role. In his 1980 report on gay rights in Northern Ireland he stated:

> It is also very heartening that in a province where religious difference divides most of the country, the gay social scene has never been sectarian. The labels ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ do not apply.... The band of common sexuality is far stronger than adherence to sectarian differences. Heterosexual society in Ulster could well take a lesson from the homosexual minority in its midst.

Dudgeon was not alone in this belief. Several other accounts also claimed that the gay community was somehow untouched by the sectarianism in Northern Ireland. One man interviewed by Duggan shared a similar optimism about the gay rights movement when he expressed, “The contrast was amazing; outside our society was being torn apart with people killing each other because they were different, but in the discos you couldn’t get more difference

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in one room and we welcomed it with open arms.” 74 Another woman commented on the fact that having a common sexuality with others allowed her to interact with and identify with those across traditional sectarian lines. 75 Ryan, another gay man interviewed by Duggan, commented similarly, “During the Troubles, the queer community was the only place Catholics and Protestants came together as they were not always safe in their communities.” 76 For these people, common sexuality represented an equalizer when it came to sectarianism; it transcended their differences and brought them together in a unique way that was not often experienced in Northern Ireland.

In contrast, other people claimed that sectarianism did pervade the community. Some claimed that because the Catholics had been a part of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, they were “more used to a civil rights idea; they were more tolerant.” 77 Another woman noted what she perceived as an absence of Protestants in at least the lesbian community when she stated, “Why were there so many ‘out’ Republican or Catholic lesbians and so few Protestant women? They say that sectarianism had no place in the LGBT&T community, but I think people are too preoccupied to distance themselves from being tarred with that brush an so they have just refused to recognise it for what it is.” 78 However, in stark opposition to this comment, another woman claimed that of those who were actively lobbying for decriminalization, a disproportionate number of them came from a Protestant or Catholic background. At least two of those whose testimony was analyzed stated their belief that any sectarian divide within the gay community was due to geographical boundaries. In some cities, such as Derry/Londonderry, the

74 Quoted in Duggan, Queering Conflict, 60.
75 Quoted in Duggan, Queering Conflict, 66.
76 “Interview of Ryan,” as quoted in Duggan, 67.
77 Quoted in Duggan, Queering Conflict, 66.
78 Quoted in Duggan, Queering Conflict, 66.
gay scene was located in either a Protestant or Catholic part of town, which discouraged those from the other side of the divide from crossing over.\textsuperscript{79}

Whether or not these interpretations of the gay and lesbian population were accurate, these testimonies prove that at the very least, the skepticism about Catholics by Protestants and vice versa did exist. By sharing perceived prejudices about those on either the Catholic or Protestant side of the conflict, those who volunteered their perception actually revealed their own sectarian beliefs. It is possible that these differing views on the impact of sectarianism on the gay community came as a result of the reality that as organized as they were, different people experience a vastly different community, or collection of people, based on where they were meeting. For example, a group of gay men and lesbians meeting at a Derry/Londonderry disco might be different from a group meeting in the Queen’s University Student Union, which might be different from a group gathering in a rural home. Therefore, it would be possible to get a diverse and mixed group in one location and a heavily Protestant or Catholic group in another. Additionally, it is possible that those who believed the gay community to be free of sectarian divisions believed this due to the fact that this was exactly the environment they were attempting to create. Likewise, it is possible that the cynicism of those who experienced sectarian divisions outside of the gay community were more likely to perceive sectarian sentiments within the community. Likely, as is often the case, the truth falls somewhere in the middle.

The question of whether Catholics or Protestants were more tolerant of homosexuality cannot be definitively answered through the research in this article. What can be said is that the sectarian conflict was messy and created a culture in which both Catholics and Protestants rejected those who had different identifiers than themselves. In a hetero-normative society, identifying as homosexual marks a person as different. Since the Catholic and Protestant

\textsuperscript{79} Duggan, 68.
communities were both hetero-normative, it followed that they were intolerant of and often
discriminated against those who they perceived to be homosexual. The differences in opinion
within the gay community on whether Catholics or Protestants were the most tolerant
demonstrate that although the activist gay community was unified and organized in terms of
advocating for decriminalization, it was, like most bodies of people, diverse. Not all gay men and
lesbians held the same opinions or perspectives simply because they shared a common sexuality.

Still, the fact that they were able to form a community based on these commonalities was
a testament to what Dudgeon said about their similarities being more powerful than sectarian
differences. On the other hand, some gay men and lesbians who lived through the Troubles still
felt that the gay community was touched by sectarianism, and they were probably correct to an
extent. The individuals who made up the gay community were still influenced by society at large
and therefore at least some people brought those ideologies with them into the gay community.

*Political activism as a response to homophobia*

Similar to the way that isolation from hetero-normative social scene led to a unique “gay
scene” that created a relatively safe space for gay men and lesbians, the negative effects faced by
gay men and women led to a significant activist response. Taken alone, the narratives above
might imply a defeatist attitude within the gay community. To make this assumption would be
entirely inaccurate and unfair to the social activists in Northern Ireland who ultimately brought
about decriminalization.

Several of those who provided interviews mentioned their recognition of the fact that
they, as gay men and women, needed to become active in order to help themselves because they
knew that they would not receive help from authority figures. Paisley’s “Save Ulster From
Sodomy” campaign of the 1970s was fighting against decriminalization and needed to be faced head on. Connor, a gay man, took it upon himself to demand answers from Paisley about his position that homosexuals were “repulsive.” Of this experience he explained, “I asked him if he thought there was any correlation between what he said and people feeling like it’s ok to smash my windows and damage my car because one of our most senior politicians says I’m repulsive.”

Another gay man, John, shared similar frustrations and explained, “What mattered to me was that one politician could keep me illegal – that was the problem. You might have homophobia in society, but if you have it at the top in the government then it’s obviously going to be more of a problem.”

He was not alone; other individuals recognized the situation of the gay community as a call for action as well. Another man, named Mark, commented on the thinking that led him to believe that he needed to act and explained, “Fifty years ago, we might have been arrested and jailed; fifty years before that we might have been hung,” and that the future could hold some other unhappy fate for gay men if it was left up to the government.

Upon reflecting on the past treatment of homosexuals in Northern Ireland, another man focused mostly on his frustration at how long and difficult of a fight gay men had to face in order to achieve decriminalization. By focusing on political activism in his narrative, this man revealed that he perceived activism to be most important reaction to the discrimination that gay men and lesbians faced. Like many other people during the 1960s and 1970s, these men chose to empower themselves through activism rather than dwelling.

Women too, were significantly involved in activism as they faced unique discrimination based on their gender in addition to their sexuality. For many lesbians, involvement in the

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80 “Interview of Connor,” as quoted in Duggan, 73.
81 “Interview of John,” as quoted in Duggan, 57.
82 “Interview of Mark,” as quoted in Duggan, 57.
83 O’Doherty. “Celebrating 30 Years.”
women’s movement led them to gay rights activism. Julie explained, “I had been active in feminist politics before I identified as lesbian. This brought me into contact with a wide range of women activists, including lesbians and this mean that I had a safe place to be me.”84 Similarly, Mary described her introduction into lesbian activism when she noted, “I started to get interested in the women’s movement and that was my first experience of encountering lesbian women.... I felt like that was somewhere I was at home.”85 As Duggan mentioned, women tended to be underrepresented in political activism in Northern Ireland.86 Lesbians who were exposed to gay rights activism found a safe outlet for being activists against both sexism and homophobia in Northern Ireland.

Dudgeon served as a perfect example of gay rights activism in Northern Ireland and his actions reflect the tendency toward action that was represented in many of the accounts. Dudgeon was involved in the movement in the form or writing letters to members of the legislative committees as early as the mid-1960s calling for decriminalization, as is evidenced by the surviving responses to these letters. Dudgeon received a response from Lord Arran thanking Dudgeon for his support in the effort for decriminalization in Parliament and also expressing his optimism that the bill would be passed into law “in the new year.”87 In January of 1967, Dudgeon received a much less positive response to his lobbying efforts in the form of a letter from MP Roy Bradford on the topic of decriminalization at Stormont. In this letter, Bradford stated that there was not yet support enough for the bill in Stormont and that they and should await the outcome of decriminalization at Westminster. Bradford explained his hesitation: “You must know as well as I do the innate conservatism in Ulster on such matters not to speak of the

84 “Interview of Julie,” as quoted in Duggan, 111.
85 “Interview of Mary,” as quoted in Duggan, 112.
86 Duggan, 103.
predictably violent reaction from the extremist puritanical fringe. I am honestly convinced that public opinion here is not yet ready for change in this field and an attempt to force the pace at this time might only set back instead of promoting hopes of reform.”

This letter writing campaign was very similar to decriminalization efforts that took place in England in the 1960s just before legislation decriminalizing homosexuality was passed, but was unsuccessful. Perhaps there was some truth in Bradford’s claim that Northern Ireland was not ready for reform due to the unique and exaggerated attitudes that were created in the environment of Northern Ireland’s “Troubles.”

Exploring the themes discussed by those who provided testimony demonstrates what gay men and lesbians experienced on a day-to-day basis in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, the height of the Troubles. Of course, they dealt with the sectarianism and violence in the same way that any other resident of the area did. However, the narratives also include experiences that were unique to the marginalized gay community. Clearly, prejudices against gay men and women complicated their lives. Additionally, these testimonies collectively demonstrate that the issues faced by the gay men and lesbians went beyond the fear that gay men faced of being convicted as criminals for their private acts of love. The societal attitudes in Northern Ireland affected all people who did not fit into heterosexual norms.

Gay men and lesbians did not simply sit back and accept the ideas the Northern Irish society held about homosexuality. They continued to live their lives and pursue their happiness even if they were forced to do so in secrecy. Additionally, the gay community demonstrated resiliency and an ability to adapt to their negative circumstances and find a way to make it positive. For example, they took advantage of the fact the people of Northern Ireland were not

going out in the potentially dangerous Belfast city center and made it their own. Additionally, many people decided to look at the persecution they faced as a cry for social activism. This attitude was precisely what was necessary in order to create a successful movement for decriminalization and broader gay rights. The ability of the people within the gay community to remain optimistic about their future and their tendency to fight back against prejudice and demand rights was exactly what caused the decriminalization of homosexuality to occur. For unlike in the rest of the UK, the government of Northern Ireland was not prepared to change the law on homosexuality as a result of activism on the part of its citizens. Instead, Dudgeon, with the support activist organizations like NIGRA, had to bring their case to the European Court of Human Rights in order to exact change.

**Beyond Decriminalization**

The sectarian conflict of the Troubles constructed a society in which intolerance toward difference was the norm. It was a climate in which unionists were pit against nationalists, and no room was left for any divergence from those categories. It was a natural extension then that the people and government of Northern Ireland were not open to the decriminalization of private homosexual acts, as homosexuality was considered another divergence from the norm. Conditioned intolerance to this degree played a major role in marginalizing LGBT people. They did not fit into either of the identity groups that they were provided with and were shunned from both. Additionally, the random violence and chaos that the Troubles created meant that decriminalization was not a top priority for the majority of people within Northern Ireland and its government. For these reasons, the decriminalization of private homosexual acts took fifteen
years longer than it did in England and happened only after the European Court of Human Rights put pressure on the government of Northern Ireland to implement it.

The discrimination and hatred displayed towards LGBT people led them to act out against inequality across the UK. In Northern Ireland in particular, this movement for decriminalization was especially important. As mentioned, decriminalization was not a priority and therefore extra effort was required in order to extend the reform to Northern Ireland. It required Jeff Dudgeon taking his case to the European Court of Human Rights for the government of Northern Ireland to heed their cries for change. Without citizen activism like this, it would have taken even longer for decriminalization to occur.

However, the decriminalization of homosexuality in Northern Ireland did not mean the end of discrimination against LGBT people, although it was an important first step toward that goal. Through the efforts of those who lobbied for homosexual legal reform, after 1982 gay men no longer had to face the fear of prosecution under the Labouchere Amendment for having private gay sex. This meant that the LGBT community became more visible, as people no longer needed to hide their sexuality for fear of legal troubles. However, harassment and intolerance toward LGBT people continued to be pervasive. Similarly, the government of Northern Ireland continued to resist the extension of laws from the British Parliament that protected the rights of LGBT people, such as in the case of equalizing the heterosexual and homosexual age of consent and with same sex marriage.89


Ireland that provides considerable insight into the period after decriminalization. The study asserted that homophobic violence and harassment continued to be a major issue in Northern Ireland after 1982 and offered recommendations on how to combat this harassment. This report examined what the policed referred to as “homophobic incidents,” which encompassed criminal and non-criminal activities such as violence, harassment, and intimidation.\(^{90}\) In one of the polls, 82 percent of those surveyed claimed to have suffered homophobic harassment, and 55 percent claimed to have suffered homophobic violence.\(^ {91}\) Examples of what this harassment or violence could include were offered by several interviewees. One woman explained, "I was intimidated for approximately 2 years by a man who lived across the back entry of my house. He continuously threw things over my wall/against my windows eg. sexual magazines, food, snowballs, fireworks, I felt at the time that homophobia was a fact of life and wouldn’t report it."\(^ {92}\) As this example indicates, more reasons existed for not reporting an incident of homophobic harassment than a fear of prosecution under the law. The woman who related this incident had no reason to fear any legal ramifications. She simply saw homophobia and homophobic violence as so pervasive that she believed no one would do anything to protect her.

Another interviewee described a situation in which he was physically abused because of his status as a gay man. He explained, “I was out at a local bar here in Magherafelt 10 years ago. I had a few too many drinks [sic] I got a kicking, black eyes etc. by two fellas under 25. I always saw these fellas about. They gave me the kicking because they said I looked gay. I had too many

\(^{91}\) Jarman and Tennant, 42.
\(^{92}\) Jarman and Tennant, 44.
drinks to fight back." This man’s experience of getting attacked while at a bar for his supposed homosexuality reads like the narratives from the 1970s.

These first-hand experiences are in fact strikingly similar to the examples of harassment included in Chapter 3 in which LGBT people described facing during the Troubles. The ICR’s research suggested that homophobic harassment, violence, and intimidation were pervasive throughout Northern Ireland into the twenty-first century. The fact that homophobic harassment and violence has continued suggests that decriminalization, while being a major step toward equality for LGBT people, did not radically shift the social environment of conditioned intolerance in Northern Ireland that was especially hostile toward homosexuality.

As was the case prior to 1982, the LGBT community continued for work to protect itself from discrimination, and indeed the community grew. NIGRA continued to be an active organization tackling LGBT issues. For example, in 1994 it led a campaign to have the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which reduced the homosexual age of consent from 21 to 18 in England and Wales, extended to include Northern Ireland. At this point, the age of consent was still not the same for homosexuals and heterosexuals, but NIGRA continued to push for equality. It was not until the passage of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill of 2000 that equalization occurred. The NIGRA website also notes that the organization has been involved in efforts to provide LGBT sensitivity training the Northern Ireland’s police forces and publishing materials on gay life for gay people in Northern Ireland.

In addition to NIGRA, many LGBT organizations have been founded in Northern Ireland in order to address various needs of the community. The Rainbow Project was founded in 1994

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93 Jarman and Tennant, 46.
94 Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association Website, “NIGRA History.”
96 Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association Website, “NIGRA History.”
in an effort to promote, “the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered people and their families in Northern Ireland, as well as those questioning their orientation or gender, through partnership, advocacy and the development and delivery of appropriate support services.” Another organization, Belfast Pride, was founded in 1990 in order celebrate diversity and the LGBT community. NIGRA, Cara-Friend, the Rainbow Project, Belfast Pride, and several other LGBT organizations ultimately banded together to form the Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSO), which, according to its website, was “established by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) groups in Northern Ireland in order to provide a voice for the LGBT Community in debates and consultations surrounding the rights of the community.” The creation of all of these LGBT organizations and the fact that they were working together in the form of CoSO demonstrated that the LGBT community was not only growing but also becoming more organized. This growth and organization was necessary based on the fact that Northern Ireland continued to have an environment that was hostile and intolerant towards LGBT people. Indeed, prejudices continued to be harbored against LGBT people even at the government level in much the same way that they were before decriminalization, as is demonstrated by the resistance that the Northern Ireland Assembly holds toward further homosexual law reform, specifically same sex marriage.

With the passage of Parliament’s Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill of 2013, marriage between same sex couples was legalized in England and Wales.\textsuperscript{100} The bill stipulates, “Under the law of Northern Ireland, a marriage of a same sex couple under the law of England and Wales is to be treated as a civil partnership.”\textsuperscript{101} The obvious implication of this provision is that same sex marriage was not extended to Northern Ireland under this bill, much like the decriminalization of homosexuality was not extended to Northern Ireland in 1967. During debates for the bill, the Minister for Women and Equalities, Maria Miller, was questioned about the plan for extending the law to proposed bill to Northern Ireland. Miller responded by explaining, “The situation in Northern Ireland will be different; this is a devolved matter and the Northern Ireland Government may take a different view.”\textsuperscript{102} From the earliest stages of the bill, then, Parliament did not intend to extend the bill to Northern Ireland without the consent of the Legislative Assembly at Stormont.

Debates of the Northern Ireland Assembly revealed strong opposition, especially from the members of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).\textsuperscript{103} Indeed, much of the argument put forth in the debates against same sex marriage was reminiscent of the debates on decriminalization. MLA Michelle McIlveen argued, “To redefine marriage is to redefine society. To redefine the word ‘marriage’ is to say that society is not about safeguarding the future but rather about the needs of the here and now.”\textsuperscript{104} Her argument was evocative of Lord Patrick Devlin’s argument that

\textsuperscript{101} HC Bill 126, “Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill.”
\textsuperscript{103} Northern Ireland Assembly, “Private Members’ Business: Marriage Equality,” 01 October 2012.
\textsuperscript{104} “Private Members’ Business: Marriage Equality,” 01 October 2012.
homosexual law reform would ultimately mean the destruction of the morality of society. Additionally, objections were made to the debate of same sex marriage on the basis that it should not be a top priority of the Northern Ireland Assembly. As MP Kennedy put it, “at a time of economic difficulty and job losses, when people are worried about bills, their job security, fuel prices as we approach winter and their shopping budgets, why are we setting aside time to debate same sex marriage?” This argument is also very similar what some opponents of decriminalization argued during the 1960s and 1970s. The only difference in that time was that the conflict of the Troubles was considered the more important priority. Plainly, the debates on gay marriage in Northern Ireland mirror those on the decriminalization of homosexuality during the twentieth century.

On October 30, 2013, the BBC published a news article titled “Stormont gay marriage debate ‘unacceptable’” in which it explained that Northern Ireland’s Equality Commission disapproves of Stormont’s inaction on the issue of same sex marriage. The article went on to explain that Northern Ireland is the only province in the UK that is not considering a change in the law in regards to marriage equality. This article reveals that resistance to homosexual law reform continues in Northern Ireland. Indeed, this continued resistance to change for LGBT equality in Northern Ireland suggests that the environment of institutional intolerance that existed during the Troubles continues to exist to this day. The government of Northern Ireland is continuing the trend of ignoring gay rights issues and/or pushing them to the back burner.

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Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the culture of conditioned intolerance that the conflict created fostered hyper-masculinity, homophobia, and hetero-normativity, delayed the process of decriminalization. Additionally, I maintain that the Troubles became the number one priority in Northern Ireland and distracted the people and government from the issue of gay rights. Across the UK, citizen activism was essential to driving decriminalization. However in Northern Ireland, LGBT activists faced more resistance in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. Ultimately, conditioned intolerance and hyper-masculinity in Northern Ireland reinforced the heterosexism and homophobia that existed and meant that ordinary LGBT people faced intense discrimination. The prejudice they faced led them to lobby for change in Northern Ireland. Through winning the case of Dudgeon v. the United Kingdom, in which Dudgeon was represented by NIGRA, the LGBT community was able to achieve decriminalization without any help from the government in Northern Ireland.

The change in the law decriminalizing private gay sex did not mean that the government and people of Northern Ireland suddenly abandoned their pre-conceived prejudices against homosexuality. Indeed, discrimination and harassment against has continued throughout Northern Ireland. Many questions remain for those studying gay rights in Northern Ireland. However, future researchers will benefit from understanding the cultural conditions that occurred in the recent past within Northern Ireland that made the decriminalization of homosexuality such a difficult transition to achieve. This article provides an understanding of the conditioned intolerance created by the Troubles and how it affected the people and government of Northern Ireland in regard to homosexual law reform. Because the mark of the Troubles remains on
Northern Ireland, this research remains relevant in informing a contemporary understanding of the LGBT rights movement.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


