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Breaking the silence on abortion: the role of adult community abortion education in fostering resistance to norms

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Meanings of abortion in society are constructed within sociohistorical and gendered spaces and manifested through myriad discourses that impact on the perception and treatment of the issue in that society. In societies with powerful oppressive anti-abortion norms, such as Northern Ireland, little is known as to how these norms are resisted by the adult population. This study uses a Foucauldian feminist approach to show how resistance to religious and patriarchal norms can be fostered through adult community abortion education. This resistance is multi-faceted and bolstered by a lived experience discourse, which does not necessarily involve eschewing religious notions held within society.

\textbf{Introduction}
The field of abortion education is in its infancy and while efforts to study abortion within the framework of sex and relationship education for children and young people are commonplace, little attention has been placed on abortion education offered in adulthood, with theoretical considerations being under-developed. Those studies that consider adult abortion education focus on interventions that occur within healthcare training settings (e.g., Espey et al. 2005; Foster et al. 2006) or on education that takes place with patients (Gould et al. 2012). Some research considers knowledge of abortion law within the context of general reproductive health education (e.g., Halpern et al. 2008). However, despite researchers arguing that medical abortion education is important to avoid women presenting late for a termination of pregnancy (Lee and Ingham 2010), we could only locate one study that solely addressed adult abortion education in community settings (that is education that explores the values, laws and norms that influence how participants think about abortion). The study by Banerjee et al. (2013, 142) identified increased knowledge of, and more positive perceptions about, abortion in India following a community-based behaviour change communication intervention. The study reported here seeks to address the dearth of knowledge on adult abortion community education and offers insights into how education may foster resistance to religious patriarchal norms.
Studies that concentrate on resistance to dominant discourses concerning abortion have mostly focused on service providers and women who have had abortions. In South Africa, for example, Gilbert and Sewpaul (2015) found that women who had terminated pregnancies challenged the notion of ‘choice’, highlighting instead structural constraints on their reproductive lives. O’Donnell, Weitz and Freedman (2011) explore how abortion service providers in the USA resist the stigmatisation that accompanies their work, while Herold, Kimport and Cockrill (2015) show how discussions in private spaces allow women to resist the silencing of abortion. What has not been addressed is how adult community abortion education may (or may not) support resistance to silences and stigma associated with abortion within particular contexts. This paper seeks to advance this research by analysing: the impact on abortion meaning created through adult community education interventions with women not previously exposed to women’s rights and feminist discourse; and whether presenting abortion as a health, welfare and social justice issue could offer different paradigms for resistance to the silencing, the stigmatisation and the norms underpinning these.

The dominance of anti-abortion norms is readily identifiable in Northern Ireland. Between 2000 and 2015 several public debates occurred in Northern Ireland on the matter of access to abortion. These debates reflect a political discourse that was overtly hostile to legal reform: a restrictive law dating from 1861 and case law from the twentieth century were presented by those opposing reform as providing an acceptable legal framework to govern access to abortion (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014). This conservative position was supported by the main religious institutions, the majority of political parties and a vocal anti-abortion movement. These organisations mobilised to argue that their position mirrored that of the wider population, ignoring public opinion polls that stated otherwise – a recent poll (BBC News 2015) indicated that on average 67% of respondents support legal reform in cases of foetal abnormality and sexual crimes.

In contrast a fragmented pro-choice lobby, consisting of organisations such as the Family Planning Association, the activist group Alliance for Choice and latterly the trade union and the women’s movement contended that reform was needed and that its absence was impacting negatively on those seeking abortion, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. This fragmentation contrasts with the dominant anti-abortion movement and has resulted in a social practice that silences discussions invoking reproductive rights or public health in relation to abortion (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014). Anti-abortion values are the dominant norms, constructed through power relations featured within churches, government and legal institutions and replicated in social practices.

Central to the Irish abortion debate is a battle over the construction of women in society, and the meanings given to sexuality, motherhood and abortion, all of which tend to cohere around religious patriarchal understandings. These religious patriarchal norms are formed within a Westernised, Christian society, combining Catholic and evangelical Protestant values (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014; Kitchin and Lysaght 2004). In this paper, we explore how women in informal education environments, such as women’s centres, talk about abortion, how they deal with the silencing of open discussion and how they understand their encounters with the education. We argue that in Northern Ireland the impasse on silencing can be overcome through mechanisms of adult community education on abortion and the creation of new alliances with liberal religious institutions. Our Foucauldian feminist orientation highlights the complexities of abortion talk and how resistance to dominant religious patriarchal norms can be nuanced to avert adversarial positions.
The Northern Ireland political context

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society, transitioning from a conflict that erupted in 1969 and had historical roots dating back centuries. The conflict that erupted in the late-1960s was fuelled by matters of nationality and discrimination, polarising communities along sectarian lines. It led to the deaths of over 3700 individuals, whilst thousands more were injured (Darby 1983; Dixon 2008). Following several failed attempts to resolve the conflict, a peace agreement was signed in 1998, resulting in the formation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the promise of equality for all (Birrell and Heenan 2013). Deep divisions remain, with sectarianism still prevalent; both communities lead largely separate lives, witnessed in housing, education, culture and sport (Nolan 2014).

The morally conservative nature of Northern Ireland is largely ascribed to the influence of religion on society and patriarchal norms, resulting in the perpetuation of heteronormative values and stereotyping of women into traditional roles resulting in a status of second-class citizens (Hayes and McAllister 2013; Schubotz and O’Hara 2011). Illustrative of this is the failure of the Northern Ireland Assembly to implement laws and policies that would be viewed as liberal, including those related to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community such as adoption for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender couples and same-sex marriage, as well as a hostile approach to abortion (Deiana 2013). Indeed, feminists have noted the dangers of placing women's concerns before the law, as in doing so it seem to invoke a power already loaded against them (Fegan and Rebouche 2003).

In Northern Ireland, Irish Catholicism, and its interplay with Irish nationalism in particular, institutionalised the role of women as mothers of the Irish Nation, with their role in nation building reduced to that of procreation (Gray and Ryan 1998). In Protestantism, similar values prevail, with women positioned in traditional roles of homemakers (Hayes and McAllister 2013). The discourse from religious bodies places women in the role of motherhood; resistance to motherhood is thus counter-hegemonic. However, as identified by Bloomer and O’Dowd (2014), there are many instances of women on the island of Ireland resisting religious patriarchy by simply ignoring the teachings of their churches on matters of sexual health including contraception, a trend observed in other areas of the world such as South America (Morgan 2014).

Reproductive health issues and abortion in Northern Ireland

Women in Northern Ireland are unable to exercise the same legal control over their bodies as women in the majority of other Western European countries (Sedgh et al. 2011). Despite being UK taxpayers, they remain unable to access the same services as women in the rest of the UK. The 1967 Abortion Act, which allows for abortion in a number of circumstances, applies to all areas of the UK other than Northern Ireland. Abortion is permitted only in restrictive circumstances, with the legal framework based on the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act (Bloomer and Fegan 2014) and case law from the twentieth century. This allows for abortion when the woman’s life is at risk or the pregnancy poses a ‘real and serious, permanent or long term’ risk to her health (111). On average, 45 legal abortions a year are carried out in Northern Ireland, whilst an average of 1000 women a year travel to other parts of the UK to access services (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014). The legal restrictions play an important role in shaping public and political discourse, providing a different perspective by which abortion is viewed compared to the rest of the UK.
Debate on abortion in the political arena is hostile, with displays of misogynistic views amongst politicians’ commonplace; they exhibit little understanding of the reality of the lives of women faced with a crisis pregnancy. Religious patriarchy is evident (Pierson and Bloomer forthcoming). Allied to this, the four main churches (Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist) have adopted a strong stance against widening access to abortion and have sought to influence political debate. In 2008, they wrote a collective letter to every British Member of Parliament asking that they refrain from voting in favour of an amendment to a bill to extend the 1967 Act to Northern Ireland. Whilst individual churches may adopt different approaches to responding to abortion, as a collective the dominant Protestant and Catholic churches exhibit a similarity in the religious patriarchy referred to throughout this article (Kitchin and Lysaght 2004) and remain hostile to legal reform.

The lobbying by religious institutions is regarded as acceptable by government, accepting as valid the role of churches in shaping morality issues and ignoring the premise of evidenced-based policy-making.

The education system exhibits clear markers of moral conservationism and religiosity, in both structure and curriculum content. Less than 10% of children attend integrated schools, where they are educated alongside members of the other ethno-religious community (Nolan 2014). Representatives of religious institutions play active roles in school management boards (Perry 2011).

Religiosity is evident in how sex and relationship education is delivered (Rolston, Schubotz, and Simpson 2005). Sex and relationship education remains largely under-developed or in some schools non-existent (Mclaughlin et al. 2007; Rolston, Schubotz, and Simpson 2005). Where it does exist, non-statutory bodies deliver sex and relationship education based on an anti-abortion and abstinence ethos (Education and Training Inspectorate 2011). This intervention contradicts and acts as a block to governmental power, contravening efforts to reduce unintended pregnancies and improve the sexual health of the population. Guidance from the Department of Education (2013) offers little in the way to balance the premises of sexual health policy with religiosity, it states that sex and relationship education ‘should be taught in harmony with the ethos of the school and reflect the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities’ (2).

Teaching on abortion also occurs within Religious Education (a mandatory subject). The core syllabus is devised by the four main churches in consultation with the Department of Education. This syllabus states that at Key Stage 4 (age 14–16), under the heading Morality; Life and Global issues, pupils can study reproductive issues, including fertility/infertility, in vitro fertilisation, surrogacy and human cloning. Notably, abortion does not appear as part of reproductive issues, but as a standalone section. The syllabus emphasises that in considering these issues ‘teachers should provide opportunities for pupils to examine the values and attitudes underlying Christian teaching in relation to each’ (Department of Education 2007, 36). Again, the repetition of the norms within a moral and religious context is evident. The norms spoken about in the previous sections lead not only to the silencing of pro-choice voices, but also the stigmatisation of women who have abortions.

Challenging these norms does occur, at family levels and through non-government organisations such as Brook and the Family Planning Association. However, these are small-scale interventions and have to be pro-actively sought. The inadequacies of sex and relationship education policy are thus thought to contribute to anti-abortion sentiment. The question we pose in this paper is whether the norms acquired at school, church and other social
spaces can be interrupted through the plurality of discourse allowed in adult community abortion education. This study will consider participants’ talk about abortion in adult education community contexts and how this may sustain or challenge hegemonic norms and be effective tools for social change.

**A Foucauldian feminist theoretical framework**

A Foucauldian feminist approach provides the theoretical framework to this study. This approach allows us to consider how power is deployed and the mechanisms by which oppressive power is resisted. Core to Foucault’s theorising was a consideration of how social norms are constructed through a power/knowledge nexus of discursive and social practices. This process of normalisation leads to members of society self-regulating according to the tenets of the norms (Lemke 2001).

Normalisation is underpinned by the ‘optics of power’ and the knowledge/power nexus. Surveillance and the normalising gaze regulate people’s behaviour, a process that operates in multiple directions: the act of looking over is accompanied by the act of being looked over. In addition, what is considered normal is linked to certain forms of knowledge that gain precedence over others. Power relations underpin what counts as ‘true’ knowledge, with particular discourses constructing reality in particular ways at particular points in time (Foucault 1977). For example, religious patriarchal power relations allow for the construction of abortion as something that is atypical and antithetical to motherhood in Northern Ireland (Bloomer and O’Dowd 2014).

Normalisation, thus, is not linked to formal mechanisms of political power. Instead, it operates through power relations that interweave through social life at macro- and micro-levels. As Foucault (2007) states: ‘Techniques of normalisation develop from and below the system of law, in its margins and maybe against it’ (56).

Foucault also explored forms of resistance to dominant power relations. Reverse or subjugated discourse seeks to subvert hegemonic discourses. For Foucault (1980):

> A whole set of knowledges … have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientficity, … It is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (82).

In this paper we explore if, and how, these kinds of reverse discourses to normalised religious patriarchal understandings appear in the talk of adults involved in adult abortion education. In line with Foucault’s (1977) assertion that power operates as a network of relations, we show how multiple themes of resistance to religious patriarchy, abortion stigma and the silencing of abortion arise in the talk of women, from problematising particular practices to rehabilitating religious discourse.

**Methodology**

The aim of the study was to explore how women in Northern Ireland who have participated in adult abortion community education, talk about abortion. Our methodological standpoint understands research as political in the sense of making women’s perspectives visible and connecting women’s knowledge to transformative forms of action that challenge the historical regimes of gender power.
This paper derives from a broader investigation mapping the provision of abortion education in lifelong learning settings in Northern Ireland. This included capturing educators’ experiences of teaching the issue of abortion in a morally conservative society. The findings of this broader study will be reported in future publications. This is the first study of its kind in Northern Ireland.

For the study reported in this paper, purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who had taken part in Alliance for Choice’s abortion education programme. Recruitment to the programme was facilitated through a general invitation issued through social media and online community networks and via an eight-week social justice programme delivered in community settings such as community centres and women’s centres.

Based on a critical pedagogical approach (Freire 1970), the programme was designed to be culturally relevant to Northern Ireland. It aimed to deliver one three-hour interactive workshop on abortion law and applicable human rights, within the context of gender awareness and feminist theory, to engage women with no previous exposure, or with hostility, to feminism and women’s rights, and to discuss abortion in a non-religious context. The materials, which included real life case studies, value exploration activities, information presentations and small-group work, were informed by international best practice, including programmes delivered by the International Planned Parenthood Federation and Catholics for Choice and delivered by a community educator with legal expertise and feminist values. Each session included 8–12 participants. Evaluation sheets were provided at the end of each workshop and externally evaluated by an independent researcher. The workshops allowed participants to explore the issue of abortion framed as a health, welfare, social justice and a bodily autonomy issue. This allowed participants to explore the origins of their own value bases and consider real life case studies in which women facing crisis pregnancies were denied an abortion.

Due to data protection issues, the research team could not approach participants directly and thus relied upon Alliance for Choice to inform participants about the study in advance of the researchers making contact with interested individuals. In all, 17 women who had participated in this programme were recruited to the study. Of the 17, 7 described themselves as anti-abortion prior to attending, but changed their opinions because of the programme; the remainder were not strictly anti-abortion, but rather somewhere on a scale from neutral to pro-choice; 10 were educated to degree level. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 35 years old.

In terms of limitations to the study, the small sample size precludes drawing generalised conclusions about those who participate in similar programmes. There is a possible bias in the sample in that it is likely that people who were open to and participated in a programme of abortion rights education are already sensitised to a liberal approach (as indicated by some of the participants identifying as pro-choice prior to the intervention). This does not detract, however, from our arguments regarding how dominant norms may be resisted in this context.

The data were gathered through individual face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted by the first author as part of a Master’s degree in education. Interviews were chosen as they allowed for exploration of views and experiences that would not be afforded in other methods, such as surveys. In general, the questions focused on expectations of the education and attitudes before and after the intervention. Questions were posed in neutral terms. The interviews were conducted post-programme, in public spaces or in
participants’ workplaces. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with a Foucauldian feminist-informed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) conducted by the research team. The researchers then compared their analysis of the material. The findings are detailed thematically in the section that follows. Interviewees were each provided with a code to differentiate their views (e.g., P1, P17). Ethical approval was provided by the Ulster University’s Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the university’s policies on research on human subjects. Participants were provided with a briefing document outlining the purpose of the study and completed an informed consent sheet prior to interviews.

**Findings**

Five main themes emerged from the analysis: problematising silence, problematising anti-choice moral education, talk of shift, taking on a lived experience discourse and rehabilitating church doctrine. In the first two, participants identified the religious patriarchal norms that silence discussion on abortion or, when it is discussed, present morally loaded anti-abortion messages. Together, these highlight a power/knowledge nexus that undermines viewing abortion as a fundamental reproductive health right.

**Problematising silencing**

One of the dominant themes emerging was the societal silence that surrounds the issue of abortion. Participants problematised the norm of not talking about abortion, even amongst close friendship groups and family members. Participants who were not born and raised in Northern Ireland expressed surprise at how strong the silencing is:

> I come from Sweden where you are free to talk about it. When I moved here I had to become very closeted about my pro-choice opinions. Whenever I have brought it up with people, I got a silencing reaction and I didn't carry on the conversation. (P21)

One participant who had returned to Northern Ireland after 10 years away explained:

> I realised that the subject [abortion] is so taboo, with an awful lot of people who just do not want to talk about it … I believe in pro-voice which is the ability to talk and debate about it to break the silence. Not a polarising anti-choice versus pro-choice debate but proper engagement with the complexity of the issue. (P14)

Both of the above quotations identified a deep-seated silencing. This fits within a wider form of what Fegan and Rebouche (2003) called ‘cultural intimidation [to] discourage the disclosure of pro-choice views’ (251). As the participant in the first extract pointed out, pro-choice voices are needed to break the silence and understand the complexity of abortion decision-making.

Opportunities to break the silence were openly welcomed. Participants cited the importance of using real-life case studies in the programme:

> I really enjoyed the real life case studies … I was happy that these women now had voices and we were breaking the silence and stigma around this issue. We need to have these conversations. (P11)

> We need to hear the voices of women in real situations and how the law has a detrimental effect on these women, especially working class women. (P18)
In the first of these two extracts, P11 celebrated ‘breaking the silence’ and argued for more such conversations. In the second, the participant spoke to the consideration of class (which participants indicated had been absent from teachings in school but was a feature of the programme). In this way, the problematisation of silence was nuanced to highlight its differential effect on women depending on class.

Several participants noted that access to abortion was especially restricted for those from lower socioeconomic groups and that neither churches nor political institutions acknowledged this. Welfare policies to support these groups were viewed as ineffective, with neither set of institutions demonstrating understanding of individuals in poverty facing a crisis pregnancy. In contrast, the programme provided exactly these opportunities and, armed with this new knowledge, participants gained confidence to speak more openly about abortion in their family and friendship groupings:

I now talk about abortion when it is relevant … and have had positive reactions … I think there is a hidden pro-choice majority here or a silent or neutral majority. (P13)

In this extract, P13 talks of positive consequences attached to openly talking about abortion. Breaking the silence was brought up by many others, whether by openly discussing abortion, by recognising and challenging community, cultural and societal silence about it, or by putting on creative performances to allow space for the issue to be brought into the open. Participants emphasised the need to talk about the experiences of those who had sought abortion, to allow their voices to be heard in amongst the silencing brought about by religious patriarchy.

Challenging silence, however, was seen as problematic in a society where the political discourse treats abortion as a taboo subject. Several participants argued that fear of losing the electorate was a dominant factor amongst silent pro-choice politicians:

What I see is an Assembly not talking about it, politicians not talking about it or not allowed to express a personal opinion if it goes against the party line. I think some of them are frightened by the pro-life lobby in case they’ll be judged harshly by the electorate. But how do they know how they will be judged if they don’t break their silence on the issue? (P14)

The inconsistent approach of politicians was identified by the same participant:

I am really surprised by some of the parties’ positions on abortion. If you are nationalist and argue for self-determination, how can you not respect women’s self-determination? If you are unionist and want to remain part of the UK why not argue for the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act in line with the rest of the UK – it is a political cop out! (P14)

The discourse on abortion from political parties was regarded with exasperation; both stances outlined above conflicted with what was viewed as the core values of each political party, yet no clear evidence was presented by the parties to explain why this occurred. Participants cited norms of anti-abortion discourse as the key explanation for silencing amongst politicians. Also evident was a sense of incredulity that political parties did not apply core values to access to abortion. As noted by Stopler (2008), while liberal states might espouse equality, as witnessed in the content of the 1998 Belfast Peace Agreement, in reality norms of religious patriarchy continue to pervade how women are viewed in society.

**Problematising morally laden anti-abortion education**

Several participants stated that religiously informed teachings had a fundamental effect on their views on abortion as children. Some participants spoke about how they had viewed
these truths without question, adopting the beliefs that they were taught by their respective educators. Others resisted these truths:

Well if you are a Catholic, you don’t have sex outside of marriage, so you don’t have unplanned pregnancies, so you don’t need an abortion. That’s what the Church teaches. (P7)

We were made to feel really bad about it … and to think abortion is a really bad thing … They read that poem about the aborted child speaking to its mother. (P7)

When I was at Catholic grammar school we were shown the ‘Silent Scream’ anti-choice film about abortion and told about the babies having fingernails. This enforced the anti-choice doctrine in our school, but I didn’t buy it. (P14)

In the first of the above three extracts, the Catholic ethos of sex for pro-creation is evident. The same participant in the second extract narrates how the power of the ‘truths’ in the anti-abortion discourse impacted on her sense of wellbeing, making her feel ‘bad’. The anti-abortion message was described as permeating the ethos of the school in the third extract, becoming a doctrine. P7 implies that the messages were so strong that they were automatically accepted, while P14 states that ‘she didn’t buy it’.

Smart (1995) argues that in the process of deconstructing or resisting particular ‘truths’, analysis of the power effects that such truth claims is essential (45). P14 is doing this when she talks about how an anti-choice doctrine was ‘enforced’ in her school. The complexity of power relations that operate to perpetuate norms (Macleod and Durrheim 2002) is witnessed in the extract below:

I think the Catholic Church gets the most flack with regards to teaching against abortion, but there is Protestant evangelical peer pressure to be religious and to say and do all the right things. They force people into making a stand on the issue without being fully educated and informed. The school system makes it worse. They cover abortion and euthanasia in a 45-minute lesson and that’s the box ticked for them. (P3)

Here, P3 identified how anti-abortion norms are reinforced in multiple ways: through Catholic Church teaching, through Protestant evangelical peer pressure, and through the teaching of Religious Education and sex and relationship education (RSE) in schools.

The anti-abortion discourse was not unique to those brought up in the Catholic faith, nor those outside the school environment. One participant, raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, described her religious background as ‘very conservative’. Even though she was homeschooling in a way that condemned abortion, she described herself as ‘pro-choice since I was 14’:

I grew up in a very conservative household with gender hierarchies and no feminist role models. In 1998 I saw the Director of Precious Life, the anti-choice group, on a chat show. She said she had just talked a 14-year-old girl out of having an abortion. I was the same age at the time and was horrified. That was really frightening for me and that’s when I became pro-choice. (P9)

This same participant had resisted the norms in her home. Apparent within the consideration of her background, she identified how patriarchal norms dominated the household (Stopler 2008).

**Shifting position**

Of the 17 participants, 4 reported changing their attitudes from anti-choice to pro-choice and 2 reported that they were interested in women’s reproductive rights when younger but did not have the opportunity to explore this outside of formal religious education. Moving
into a consideration of adulthood, participants narrated stories of how the anti-abortion discourse that had permeated their childhood had been changed by adult community education programmes:

Before the module, I was totally against abortion as I was brought up in the Catholic religion. Then I undertook the course and totally changed my opinion. I am now firmly pro-choice; everyone has the right to choose. Before that my attitude was based on ignorance and religion. (P5)

With the benefits of an education I am now completely pro-choice … so this does affect how I see other anti-choice people. I feel they are on a journey and are not as far on in that journey as I am. (P3)

In the above two extracts, away from an educational environment in which religious patriarchy dominated, participants acquired new knowledge and resisted the norms previously encountered. In the first of them, the participant identified that her views had been based on ‘ignorance and religion’ – the ‘truths’ emanating from the religious patriarchal discourse were categorically discounted. In categorising previous knowledge as being based on ‘ignorance’ and their present positions as being further on a journey, these women suggest that their current stance is more progressive. This resistance is analogous to that identified by Bloomer and O’Dowd (2014) and Morgan (2014) in their consideration of teachings of religious patriarchal institutions on matters such as contraception, divorce and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. For almost all participants, adult community education provided the first opportunity, away from the discourse of religious patriarchy, to discuss abortion.

Lived experiences

Participants highlighted that the most impactful approach to challenging anti-abortion discourse was the use of case studies illustrating women’s lived experiences:

The case studies really opened my eyes to circumstances where you can understand why women would access abortion, i.e., the wellbeing of the mother. I still think it is morally wrong but different situations and circumstances may require it. (P8)

In all training interventions the complex set of circumstances that women find themselves in need to be outlined, we need to hear the voices of women in real situations and how the law has a detrimental effect on these women, especially working-class women. (P1)

… look at the anomaly that Northern Ireland is in the rest of Europe and also what women have to do when they can’t access it here. (P2)

A discourse of ‘lived experience’ allowed participants to speak to an ‘alternative truth’. Participants spoke of their ‘eyes being opened’, ‘understanding’ and ‘hearing’ the voices of women. As evident in the extracts, the ‘lived experience’ discourse allowed participants to consider the circumstances of each case, the complexities of the situation, the effect on the wellbeing of the women, especially working-class women, and the difficulties encountered by women.

Rehabilitating religious discourse

Within the programme, the educational materials had included the Christian Churches’ stance on abortion and consideration of how it had developed historically. Consideration of this new ‘truth’ had a clear impact:
I was fascinated to learn that the Church did not always condemn abortion ... that is relatively recent. Having the topic framed in the history of women’s rights is an excellent way to teach it, as it gives you reference for what else was going on in society at the time and how making abortion illegal fulfilled a purpose for Church and State. (P1)

In the above, the participant explains how a historical perspective sheds light on religious teachings, and the intertwining of patriarchal power relations in the church’s current stance. This positioning led some participants to realise that they could be pro-choice and remain Christian, something that they had previously considered contradictory:

The most important part to me was finding out that the Church’s decree on abortion is a relatively new thing. I know Northern Ireland is a morally conservative place, but people need to know that they can be Christian and pro-choice. We need to let Christians know that these two things are not mutually exclusive. (P13)

In both of the above extracts, the moral positioning of abortion normalised by religious patriarchal discourse was overthrown. This rejection was facilitated by a consideration of historical evidence, offered within an educational setting away from the reach of religious patriarchy. A new narrative about the meaning of abortion, allowing participants to view abortion through an alternative prism was developed, allowing them to consider that abortion is moral.

Discussion and Conclusion

Adult abortion education in community settings offers the possibility of creating dialogical spaces for people to reflect on and resist oppressive norms regarding reproduction and abortion. In Foucauldian terms, these interventions provide the possibility of highlighting the power/knowledge relations underpinning these norms and for the emergence of reverse or subjugated discourses. Despite this, most adult abortion education research has focused on health service providers or patients. In this study, we analysed the responses of women who participated in an adult community education programme on abortion. Given the strong anti-abortion discourses and the religious patriarchy that underpins much of gendered life in Northern Ireland, we were interested in noting how women discussed their encounters with this programme.

The emergent themes speak to a resistance to dominant power/knowledge nexus. Participants problematised the silencing, as well as talk that depicts abortion in wholly negative terms. They spoke about shifting their own position. This shifting was facilitated, it appears, by the deployment of a subjugated discourse of lived experience, and of a reverse discourse of rehabilitating Church teachings. Some participants identified resistance to the norms around abortion prior to this educational intervention, which then provided them with validation of their previous resistance.

The educational process had, it appears, allowed participants to reflect and problematise religious patriarchal norms and to deploy reverse or subjugated discourses, facilitated through the contemplation of real women and their complex situations. Participants then had the opportunity to consider the contradiction between the norms of religious patriarchy and lived experience. They were able to draw on a lived experience discourse and to rehabilitate Church teachings as resistive strategies to religious patriarchal norms regarding abortion.

Our findings point to the potential of adult community education courses of this nature in providing the space from which resistances may arise. Of particular note was the realisation
by participants that they could be both Christian and pro-choice. Given the context within which these women live, this appears to be an important element of the resistant talk.

This finding speaks to the importance of contextualising adult community education courses of this nature. The rights-based discourse, on which many global reproductive rights movements base their arguments, was not drawn on by participants. Our data suggest that a rights-framework would not be sufficient to provide resistance to the anti-abortion discourse in contexts like Northern Ireland. This is consistent with the problematisation of human rights discourse in Northern Ireland, which can be traced back to the legacy of the political conflict and the association with republican/nationalist endorsement and unionist/loyalist suspicion.

These findings suggest that a consideration of moral pluralism is relevant, raising a question as to whether it is necessary to produce widespread moral consensus on the question of abortion in order to liberalise the legal framework (Ferree and Gamson 2003). Religious institutions might contribute to changes in abortion education; for example, previous studies have indicated that liberal religious representatives can spark change among their peers. Some faith-based organisations in Africa advocate using condoms, against the official teachings of their churches. They justify this with both scientific and faith-based justice arguments (Becker and Geissler 2009). Worldwide organisations including Catholics for Choice lobby for improved access to abortion and provide further evidence that the social construction of religion and its doctrines, not religion in or of itself, is anti-abortion (Romeiro 2010). In Northern Ireland, churches and faith-based groups could provide such leadership and the opportunity to explore the issue through health, welfare and social justice perspectives.

Civil society alliances consisting of churches, feminist groups and adult community educators could challenge norms of religious patriarchy. In forming these new alliances the silencing of pro-choice voices can be overcome. The authors would recommend research on the experiences of educators who deliver abortion education to explore their experiences and build a knowledge base of best practice. Interventions should be tailored to the particular needs, interests and motivations of learners grounded within the lived experience discourse to challenge abortion stigma, break the silence and resist patriarchal religious norms.

Note
1. The 17 Interviewees were each allocated a code for anonymity purposes the codes were preceded with P (to denote participant) and numbers 1–17. P1 being the first interview conducted and P17 the last interview.

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