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Collective Agency in Reparation Politics: A Contentious Politics Perspective on Victim Mobilisation in Northern Ireland

Pia Falschebner , Eva Willems * and Thorsten Bonacker 

Centre for Conflict Studies, Philipps-University Marburg, Marburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a better understanding of the collective agency of survivor organisations in Transitional Justice (TJ) processes by studying their claims for reparations as contentious politics. Examining two different survivor groups in Northern Ireland, we argue that applying concepts from social movement theory to understand victim groups in TJ is valuable in four ways: Firstly, it facilitates an analytical assessment of how and why survivors organise, and allows to systematically unravel the factors impacting mobilisation. Secondly, approaching survivor groups as strategic political actors engaged in contentious politics shifts the focus back to their agency as drivers of TJ. Thirdly, it helps to understand survivor groups “from within” and reveals the diversity and complexity of survivors’ identities, strategies and demands in transitional settings. Lastly, focusing on survivors’ collective agency helps to move beyond a liberal human-rights based approach to victim organisations and to consider groups acting within different moral frameworks.

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Transitional justice; social movement theory; victim organisations; reparations; Northern Ireland

Introduction

This article contributes to a better understanding of the collective agency of victim and survivor organisations in Transitional Justice (TJ) processes by studying their claims for reparations as “contentious politics” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Survivors’ collective action in the aftermath of mass human rights violations appears to be in need of explanation, as individual victims are often isolated or grappling with trauma, and collective political action tends to be conflict-laden. In addition, there is a high degree of heterogeneity among victims, both in terms of group affiliations and experiences of violence. Against this background, it does not seem self-evident for victims to act collectively (Gready and Robins 2017). Yet they do, not only at the local level, but also on the national political

CONTACT Pia Falschebner  pia.falschebner@uni-marburg.de  Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps-University Marburg, Marburg, Germany, Ketzertbach 11, 35037 Marburg, Germany

*History Department and Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. Email: eva.willems@ugent.be.

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stage. To explain this collective agency, we use concepts from social movement theory (SMT), more specifically framing, repertoires of action, resource mobilisation and political opportunity structures, to understand victims' claims for reparations as "contentious politics". By focusing on the means and conditions under which political mobilisation takes place, we aim to gain greater insight into the role of victim groups as claim-making civil society actors in reparation politics (Millward and Takhar 2019).

Reparations – including measures of restitution, rehabilitation, compensation, and satisfaction (UN General Assembly 2006) – are considered a central element of TJ and have recently received increased attention in research on post-conflict justice (Bunselmeyer 2020; de Feyter et al. 2005; Moffett 2017a,b, 2023). In our article, we focus on claims around state-administered reparations. These are particularly well-suited to the analysis of survivor mobilisation, as demands are directly targeting policymakers and the struggle unfolds in the national political arena. By studying victim organisations' demands for reparations as contentious politics, we follow recent scholarly interventions in the field of TJ that have argued for greater use of the tools of SMT to examine mobilisation processes.

We are primarily interested in how reparation politics are embedded in broader (human) rights discourses. The relation between rights and collective action is twofold: on the one hand, the right to reparation is the historical and empirical result of mobilisation. On the other hand, (human) rights discourses are mobilised in reparation politics. SMT helps us to better understand this connection between rights and collective action.

Two important contributions that have demonstrated the insightfulness of using concepts from SMT to study how victim groups shape reparation politics are Rombouts' (2004) and Gallagher's (2021) case studies on Rwanda and Northern Ireland respectively. Gready and Robins (2017, 961) have furthermore pointed to the emergence of "new" civil society groups in the context of TJ, whose repertoire and transformative potential is more akin to social movements than to NGOs, which are often created and or supported by international donors.¹ Similarly, in her study on the politicisation of TJ in Tunisia, Han has argued that understanding human rights activism as contentious politics offers the possibility to explore the transformative potential of civil society groups who challenge the classical liberal understanding of TJ by placing socio-economic rights at the centre of their demands (Han 2022). In her study of the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo", Vegh Weis (2017, 6) has moreover demonstrated how victim groups not only take advantage of existing opportunity structures but also create new ones. Dempster (2022), lastly, has shown the importance of framing for victims' mobilisation and the resulting collective action. Her study of Northern Ireland highlights that the continuation of a "metaconflict" (Mallinder 2019) can also contribute to the mobilisation of victims along entrenched conflict lines, thereby limiting its transformative potential.

Drawing on an analysis of two victim groups' claims for material compensation in Northern Ireland, the article aims to contribute to this emerging line of research that connects the field of TJ to SMT to obtain a better understanding of the collective agency of survivor groups in the aftermath of mass human rights violations. The first group to be examined is the WAVE Injured Group, which has been the driving force behind the

¹For research on the relation between NGOs and victim groups see Mijke de Waardt and Ypeij (2017).

campaign for a pension for the seriously injured victims of the conflict. Secondly, we look at the War Widows' Association Great Britain (hereafter: WWA), which has played a prominent role in campaigning around problems relating to the implementation of the War Widows' Pension (hereafter: WWP).

In what follows, we will first situate our study within existing debates in the field of TJ to demonstrate that, despite an increased interest in victims' agency, there has been comparatively little scholarly exploration into how victim groups attain political agency when acting as collective entities within civil society. We will then outline the methodology and the conceptual SMT framework of the article. Following a brief historical overview of the Northern Irish conflict and post-conflict landscape, we will proceed with the case studies and offer an analysis of the two aforementioned survivor groups and their respective campaigns for reparations. We will first briefly sketch the history and structure of each group, before exploring four different aspects of their modes of organisation, mobilisation and claim-making, namely (1) collective identity-building and framing, (2) repertoires of action, (3) resource mobilisation, and (4) political opportunity structures. In the conclusion, we link the findings of the case studies with a general reflection on the added value of SMT for understanding the role of victim and survivors in the context of TJ.

Victims' agency in TJ

In recent years, the field of (critical) TJ studies has increasingly paid attention to micro-level strategies of dealing with the past, rather than focusing exclusively on the top-down implementation of a globalised TJ model. This call to study TJ "from below" (McEvoy and McGregor 2008) or to "localise" it is rooted in a critique of technocratic top-down approaches and goes hand in hand with a generally stronger focus on victims' agency, as well as growing scholarly interest in the role of local civil society actors (Brankovic and van der Merwe 2018; Hinton 2010; McEvoy and McConnachie 2013; Nyseth Brehm and Golden 2017; Robins 2011; Tamayo Gomez 2022). Among other things, the "local turn" has pointed to the different roles that civil society groups take on in dealing with a violent past: they monitor TJ policies (Backer 2003), function as service providers in the implementation of victim-related measures (Rombouts 2004), or act as independent actors of recovery at the local level (Gready and Robins 2017), including in the form of a politicising activism that articulates resistance to hegemonic forms of TJ (Jones and Adou Djané 2018).

Despite this relevance of civil society in processes of coming to terms with a violent past, existing studies on the role of civil society in TJ mostly focus either on domestic human rights NGOs' support for official TJ mechanisms (see e.g. Van der Merwe and Schkolne 2017) or on the TJ movement as a transnational social movement (Rowen 2017), whereas the involvement of grassroots actors as civil society actors has received less scholarly attention (Gready and Robins 2017, 961). The focus of research on victims' agency has long been on victim participation through institutional mechanisms of dealing with the past, for example in internationalised criminal trials such as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia or the International Criminal Court (Bernath 2016; Killeen and Moffett 2017; Sperfeldt and Oeung 2019), while "meaningful participation" has frequently disappeared from view (de Waardt and Weber 2019; Evrard, Bonifazi, and Destrooper 2021; Firchow and Selim 2022). The renewed focus

on the quality of participation goes hand in hand with a stronger interest in the transformative capacity of civil society actors, including victim groups, who are increasingly seen as political actors seeking to influence political decision-making processes beyond the narrowly defined institutional framework of TJ (Gready 2019; Gready and Robins 2017) or to establish participatory forms of democracy at the local level (de Waardt and Ypeij 2017).

The local turn in TJ research has been part of an overarching shift towards vernacularisation in human rights and peacebuilding that has emerged from a critique of the hegemony of liberal approaches and highlights frictions between a global model of TJ and local realities – including the lives of survivors (Björkdahl and Höglund 2013; Buckley-Zistel 2016; Kent 2012). This has sparked increased interest in how different social groups gain agency in post-war societies. Björkdahl and Selimovic (2015) argue that agency goes beyond action and aims at change and transformation. Victim participation then means more than taking on institutionally designated roles: it involves the process of publicly defining such roles and thus constituting oneself as a political actor (Gardiner 1995). The question of survivors' agency hence goes far beyond the question of their participation in existing TJ mechanisms and addresses their role as political subjects (Howarth 2004). This question of how groups achieve political agency in TJ contexts has so far received less scholarly attention and there are only few contributions that explore the question of how victim groups constitute themselves as interest groups and act as collective claim-makers (see e.g. Gallagher 2021; McEvoy and McConnachie 2013; Rombouts 2004).

Against this background, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the emergence of victim organisations as civil society groups in TJ contexts by conceptualising them as contentious political actors. Rudling (2019) has recently shown that internal dynamics and struggles within victim organisations contribute to the formation of victim agency. In contrast to her work, we focus less on internal dynamics and more on how groups constitute themselves externally as collective actors. As Barton-Hronešová's (2020) study on the role of "victim capital" in Bosnia and Herzegovina suggests, the interaction between victim groups and their national and international environment in particular plays a central role in the ability to realise demands for compensation. For the Northern Irish context, several scholars have pointed to the importance of existing "hierarchies of victimhood" in defining whose voices and which narratives compete in the public sphere (Hearty 2019; Jankowitz 2018; Lawther 2022; McEvoy and McConnachie 2013). In our analysis of reparation politics in Northern Ireland, we will apply a SMT lens to examine forms of organisation, mobilisation and claim-making of victims and survivors to gain a better understanding of their collective agency in the wake of conflict and violence.

Methodology

Similar to TJ, the field of social movement research is interdisciplinary in nature and problem-focused rather than method-oriented (Della Porta 2014, 2), two features that also characterise our methodological approach. The empirical research was conducted as part of a larger comparative study that examines reparation politics of victim and survivor organisations² in the context of TJ processes in four different case studies: Northern Ireland, Morocco, Guatemala and Timor Leste.

Fieldwork and interview methodologies are particularly relevant for grasping “motives, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as the identities and emotions of movement activists” (Della Porta 2014, 14). For this paper, author 1 and author 2 conducted eighteen semi-structured in-depth interviews across Northern Ireland. Of the eighteen interviewees, fifteen were representatives of a total of eleven different civil society groups. All interviewees declined the option to have their names anonymised, most of them being activists whose opinion is public.

Conducting fieldwork in a post-conflict setting inevitably poses practical, ethical, and epistemological challenges,³ including in relation to the impact of (re)living violence on research participants, the researcher’s positionality, and the representation of survivors’ voices (Lawther, Killeen, and Dempster 2019). Although our research did not focus on participants’ experience of the conflict, we are aware that talking about the conflict’s aftermath can be painful in itself and carries the risk of re-traumatisation. For this very reason, one of the research participants was granted the opportunity to engage with our interview topic guide through a written response, which was complemented by an informal meeting.⁴ In addition, conducting fieldwork in Northern Ireland means entering a polarised society. As outsiders, we tried to navigate the challenges involved by being aware of the sensitivities in both communities (e.g. with regards to the language used to refer to the conflict and its actors), while adopting a neutral position as researchers. It must be noted that due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic our possibilities for participant observation during fieldwork were limited.

In addition to fieldwork, author 1 and 2 conducted an extensive desk-study of the Northern Irish post-conflict landscape with a specific focus on reparation politics and victim groups, drawing on government documents, reports by civil society organisations, publications by victim groups, social media posts, and academic literature.

For the case studies in this article, we selected two victim groups: the WAVE Injured Group, and the WWA. This choice was motivated primarily by the fact that both groups have been the driving force behind sustained campaigns on issues of administrative monetary compensations which have led to concrete results. The groups moreover have different constituencies, respectively injured civilians and military bereaved, which are also highly gendered: whereas many of the injured are men, the majority of family members of the military bereaved are women.⁵ As a result of the article’s focus on the activism of two specific groups, the voices of three interviewees figure prominently in this paper: Paul Gallagher, leading member of the WAVE Injured Group⁶; Mary Moreland, chairperson of the WWA from 2017 to 2020 and the driving force behind the WWP reinstatement campaign;

²While being aware of the many debates that exist around the terminology of ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’ in different post-atrocity contexts, in this paper we use the terms ‘victims’, ‘survivors’ and ‘victims and survivors’ interchangeably. This choice is motivated, among other reasons, by the fact that our research project also includes groups that do not primarily self-identify as victims (e.g. veterans or ex-combatants).

³For a good overview of the challenges of conducting fieldwork in (post-)conflict settings see Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel (2021).

⁴Alternative forms of interview engagement can help to avoid the potential harms of retraumatisation. See Bliesemann de Guevara and Poopuu (2021).

⁵On the gendered dimension of compensations in Northern Ireland see: Moffett and Hearty (2023, 23).

⁶Paul Gallagher is currently also employed as a Trauma Education Officer at WAVE, but during the interview he represented the WAVE Injured Group. Apart from being an activist, Paul is also an academic and wrote his PhD Thesis about the WAVE Injured Group’s campaign for reparations. For a detailed analysis of the WAVE Injured Group and their struggle for reparations see Gallagher (2021).

and Linda McHugh, member of the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF)⁷ and associated with the WWA. All three indicated through the informed consent procedure that they prefer to appear in publications under their real names. For the case of the WWA, the transcripts of three interviews conducted by the “War Widows’ Stories” project⁸ were used as additional sources: the transcript of an interview with Mary Moreland (mentioned above; hereafter: War Widows’ Stories, Moreland 2017) as well as with Susanne Rimmer (widow of a British army soldier killed in Northern Ireland; hereafter: War Widows’ Stories, Rimmer 2019) and with Kate Thomas (RAF widow; hereafter: War Widows’ Stories, Thomas 2019), both of whom lost their pension rights upon remarriage.

Working with a limited number of cases has the advantage that it allows us to present a more in-depth narrative of the organisation’s trajectory. The fact that leading members of the respective organisations take on a prominent role in this narrative stems from the fact that they have the most institutional knowledge. It is important to underscore, however, that the selection of cases and respondents is not intended to be representative of the many victim groups active in Northern Ireland, nor does it claim to provide an analysis of the diversity and hierarchies that exist between and within these organisations. Rather, the case-studies are aimed at operationalising the SMT framework to understand victim groups’ collective agency. The empirical material hence primarily sustains a conceptual argument, rather than making general claims about victim groups in Northern Ireland. In the next section, we will explore the conceptual framework in more depth.

Contentious politics of survivor groups: a conceptual framework

In this paper, we understand survivor groups as collective actors that are involved in “contentious politics”, that is,

interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interest, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 4)

As the concept covers a broad range of actors, contexts, interactions, issues and claims, it allows to capture both variation and regularity (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 11) as well as complex dynamics (Saunders 2022) and is thus particularly apt to approach often heterogeneous post-conflict populations of victims and survivors. With its clear focus on actors and their role in advocating for change, and given social movement theory’s primary interest in “conflictual collective action” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 20), the concept also allows to a special degree to foreground and make sense of collective political agency, including that of victim groups. To analyse survivor groups as strategic collective political actors engaged in “contentious politics” and offer a deeper reading of the different layers of their mobilisation, we borrow from four interlinked key concepts of SMT, which we will introduce below: (1) collective identity and framing, (2) repertoires of action, (3) resource mobilisation and (4) political opportunity structures. All four are essential to explain mobilisation and mobilisation outcomes. More so, they influence and complement each other in complex ways. We

⁷SEFF is an advocacy and service-delivery organisation for and by victims of the armed conflict based in Lisnaskea, with regional offices in Newtownstewart, Rathfriland, Bessbrook, South Armagh and London.

⁸This project aimed at preserving the heritage of war widows is a collaboration between Dr. Nadine Muller (Liverpool John Moores University) and the WWA (<http://www.warwidowsstories.org.uk>, accessed 20 August 2022).

propose that incorporating these concepts into the analysis of survivors' agency in TJ will enable us to better comprehend how victim organisations develop collective agency, the goals they pursue, and the factors that shape the outcome of their struggles.

Collective identity and framing

The construction and maintenance of a collective group identity is at the heart of any movement and is essential to mobilise members and forge unity (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 282, 292). Framing – understood as an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614) – is key to this process of identity construction and reproduction (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291). “Boundary framing”, the drawing of a clear line between in- and out-group, is a particularly important component in the generation of collective identity (Benford and Snow 2000, 616). However, while exclusionary and radical identities tend to be more stable, they also make it more difficult to build a broad membership and form alliances. The successful public framing of its collective identity is hence decisive for a group's ability to recruit new members, make its demands heard, fend off opponents and forge alliances. In line with the general fluidity of a movement's collective identity, the framing thereof is situational, with different definitions of identity prevailing or being emphasised depending on a given situation, strategic needs and audiences (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291–298).

Framing is also crucial to shape and articulate common goals and strategies as well as to create legitimacy (Benford and Snow 2000, 614–618). As part of this meaning-making process, actors involved in contentious politics produce “collective action frames”, “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Though varying in content, these are always guided by a tripartite framing structure: the collective interpretation of a given problem and its cause (*diagnostic*) is followed by the articulation of an alternative solution (*prognostic*) and, lastly, the identification of strategies and measures to mobilise (*motivational*). This does not mean, however, that collective action frames are static or predefined. To the contrary, they are subject to constant contestation and negotiation, as well as incessant adaptation and extension. Often, frames reference or are integrated into larger, more widely applicable “master frames” understood by a broader audience, such as human rights (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–619, 623–628).

Repertoires of action

Collective action is defining of contentious politics. Accordingly, the tactical repertoire is central to a movement's success. Protest repertoires typically include and combine a variety of different action forms, ranging on a spectrum from conventional or non-confrontational to confrontational.⁹ The possible choice of claim-making tactics is however not endless, but confined by availability and the limits of the known (Tilly and Tarrow

⁹Conventional action forms encompass things like petitions, informative events, boycotts, media engagement and negotiation, whereas action forms such as strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, controversial symbolic actions or illegalised actions fall in the confrontational category (Taylor and van Dyke 2004, 267).

2007, 49). Repertoires, such as petitions, media engagement, demonstrations or controversial symbolic actions, are always simultaneously shaped by external conditions, such as the nature of a political system, cultural codes or historically grown conditions, and internal factors, such as the movement's organisational structure and strength or the nature of its goals and demands (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 16; Taylor and van Dyke 2004, 271–278). They also always operate in the field of tension between innovation/uniqueness and persistence/conformity (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996, 23; 2001, 41; Tarrow 2011, 29f.; Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 12, 16). As is the case with framing, repertoires are dynamic and the outcome of constant processes of reaction, adaptation, innovation, and negotiation (Della Porta 2008, 22).

Resource mobilisation

Collective action is in many ways tied to the availability of and access to resources and their strategic use. Rather than just focused on material aspects, this also includes human, cultural, socio-organisational, or moral resources. Access to resources can be secured and advanced through a variety of mechanisms and strategies, including aggregation, self-production, appropriation/co-optation and patronage. Most groups combine external and internal sources and rely on different modes of resource access at once. Resources differ in terms of context-dependency, transferability, durability, and ownership. Groups' access to and control over resources hence varies over time and space, and depends on a group's capacity at a given moment (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

Political opportunity structures

Contentious actors always are part of and act within a given social and political context, which not only functions as frame of reference but also defines a group's scope of action. As such, political scope conditions decisively impact their choice of repertoires and determine a group's success potential in terms of mobilising constituencies, advancing claims, and exerting influence (Meyer 2004, 126–128). Accordingly, contentious politics are always shaped by changing political opportunity structures (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 41), defined by Tilly and Tarrow as “features of regimes or institutions [...] that facilitate or inhibit a political actor's collective action” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 49). Broadening this rather state-centric understanding, other scholars have also considered international alliances, public policy changes, or opponents' activities in their analysis of political opportunity structures (Meyer 2004, 135). Both expanding and shrinking political opportunities can drive mobilisation and collective action (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 43).

In order to explore the role of civil society actors in contested reparation policies, the following case study section analyses two Northern Irish survivor groups and their demands for reparations using these four key SMT concepts.

Victim groups and their reparation claims in Northern Ireland

Conflict, transitional justice and civil society in Northern Ireland

Starting from 1969, as a result of the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921 and longstanding lingering “unresolved issues of nationality, religion, power and territorial

rivalry” (McKittrick and McVea 2002, 1), and against the backdrop of a longer history of dispossession and discrimination against the Catholic Nationalist population under Protestant Unionist rule, a conflict unfolded in Northern Ireland (Cochrane 2021; McEvoy 2008, 21–38). This conflict, fought between Catholic Republicans (seeking unification with the Republic of Ireland) and Protestant Unionists (wanting Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK), and marked by the involvement of the British army, cost over 3,500 lives, left nearly 50,000 injured and affected an estimated 120,000 (Interim Commissioner for Victims & Survivors 2006, 5). While the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought a fragile peace, truth, justice and victimhood remained deeply contested and both politics and society caught up in antagonistic logics. As a consequence, the approach to dealing with the past has been piecemeal, with no overarching strategy. Some progress regarding unresolved issues around dealing with the past was made with the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) (2014)¹⁰ and the Fresh Start Agreement (2015)¹¹, which was meant to ensure the SHA’s full implementation. However, the implementation has faced major difficulties and delays due to ongoing political controversies. The latest upheaval has been a unilateral legacy proposal by the British government that would essentially abandon the SHA agreements and draw a line under the past, making any further prosecutions or criminal investigations into the conflict impossible (Dawson et al. 2022). Despite widespread opposition and concern in Northern Ireland,¹² in September 2023, the British government passed the “Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023”.¹³

The fragmented approach to TJ is also reflected in the reparation landscape, where diverging understandings of the past and disagreements over the definition of a victim have forestalled a comprehensive and large-scale reparation policy, leaving victims with little support.¹⁴ In fact, “victims and the issue of reparations have become new sites of conflict” in Northern Ireland (Moffett 2020, 24). While reparation efforts such as the WWP – a “survivor pension” for widow/ers of members of the armed forces – predate the onset of the conflict (UK Government n.d.), this long history does not reflect an equitable and adequate reparation strategy: until 2015, the WWP was withdrawn in case of remarriage or cohabitation with a new partner (Ministry of Defence, Veterans UK, and The Rt Hon Dr. Andrew Murrison MP et al. 2023; Thurley and Kennedy 2021). In turn, the “Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation” scheme, first set up in 1968,¹⁵ provided some relief to surviving dependants, but for the longest time excluded relatives of alleged paramilitaries (Criminal Injuries (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, 6 (3); Criminal Injuries (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, 5(9)). The “Remembrance Commission Scheme” (2003–2008), then, accounted for more substantial payments to survivors, but only applied in the Republic of Ireland (The Remembrance Commission 2004). Other initiatives, such as the “Northern Ireland Memorial Fund” (NIMF, 2001–2012), later replaced by the “Victims’ and Survivors Service” (VSS), included different grant schemes (Interim

¹⁰See Northern Ireland Office (2014).

¹¹See Northern Ireland Office (2015).

¹²See e.g. Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) (2021), McEvoy et al. (2022).

¹³See Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act (2023).

¹⁴For a detailed description of reparation politics in Northern Ireland see Moffett (2020), Moffett and Hearty (2023).

¹⁵See The Criminal Injuries to Persons (Compensation) Act 1968 (1969).

Commissioner for Victims & Survivors 2006, 9.f., 29–31), but proved not comprehensive enough (Moffett 2020, 3). With the introduction of a means-tested approach in 2010 and the subsequent limitation of financial assistance to those “most in need”, the NIFM and VSS came under severe criticism (Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland (CVSNI) 2012, 5; WKM Solutions 2014). The latest development in the reparation landscape has been the introduction of a compensation scheme for individuals severely injured during the conflict. After a years-long struggle, to a large part dominated by heated discussions about the eligibility of applicants with conflict-related convictions,¹⁶ the breakthrough came in 2021 with the eventual establishment of the so-called “Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme” (TPDP),¹⁷ commonly referred to as “Victims’ Payment Scheme” or “Injured Pension”. As was the case for other groups of victims, the compensation schemes previously in place hardly covered the long-term costs of disability or catered for other concerns such as reintegration into the labour market, leaving people to depend on state benefits (Breen-Smyth 2012, 19–21; Authors Interview, Paul Gallagher, WAVE Injured Group, Belfast, 24.11.2021, hereafter: Interview 24.11.2021). In sum, compensations in Northern Ireland have been characterised by disparities in terms of the benefits and payments available to different kinds of victims (e.g. military bereaved vs. civilian victims, or injured vs. bereaved victims), and by payments that have in many cases been insufficient and hardly appropriate to account for the manifold and different dimensions of loss (e.g. economic and moral) (Moffett and Hearty 2023).

Confronted with a lack of official support structures, an increasing number of survivor groups started to organise from the late 1980s onwards, oftentimes in the form of self-help groups. Through our desk study, we could trace the (historical) existence of 61 survivor groups. While many of these have by now ceased to exist or have shifted their focus away from the conflict, a number of victim and survivor groups continue to operate. The majority of these groups, however, are predominantly concerned with supporting survivors through offering different kinds of services, often at the local level. A comparably smaller number of less than ten survivor groups takes on advocacy work and actively intervenes in politics. While some survivor groups are cross-communal, many still organise along community lines and essentially only cater for survivors from a certain constituency.¹⁸ In the following, we want to explore in more detail the case of two survivor groups – WAVE’s Injured Group and the WWA – and the extent to which they act (ed) as political and strategic collective actors to achieve their aims. By analysing the

¹⁶Protracted and deeply politicised debates around the definition of a victim have stalled the establishment of the Victims’ Payment Scheme for years, with Sinn Féin claiming that the scheme would potentially discriminate against Republicans with conflict-related convictions while the Unionist parties, most notably DUP, refuse any payment to what they deem “terrorists” (see e.g. BBC News 2018, 2021). Estimates suggest that the controversial group of injured individuals with conflict-related convictions would be around 10 cases (South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) 2018).

¹⁷The Stormont House Agreement of 2014 acknowledged the need to address the situation of the severely physically injured. The “Victims’ Payments Regulations 2020” provide the legal framework for the scheme, but were however only adopted beginning of 2020, following a consultation process by the Northern Ireland Office in 2019 (see HM Government 2019). Originally planned to accept applications from May 2020 onwards, after further delays due to dispute about funding and administering responsibilities as well as ongoing disagreements about beneficiaries (Black 2020), the TPDP at last opened its doors to applications in August 2021. See Payment Scheme Disabled Persons. The Victims’ Payments Regulations 2020 (2020) or <https://www.victimspaymentsboard.org.uk/faqs-0> for further details on the TPDP.

¹⁸These findings are based on our desk-study which maps victim and survivor groups in Northern Ireland.

strategies of collective identity building and framing, repertoires of action, resource mobilisation and political opportunity structures deployed by each group, we want to demonstrate the usefulness of SMT to deepen our understanding of the role of survivors in TJ processes.

The WAVE Injured Group and the “Campaign for Recognition”¹⁹

WAVE, initially an acronym for “Widows Against Violence Empower”, was founded in 1991 as a self-help group for widows. In 1995, the membership was expanded to include those injured or otherwise traumatised (WAVE Trauma Centre [n.d.a](#)). Today, WAVE is not only Northern Ireland’s largest cross-community survivor group (WAVE Trauma Centre [n.d.a](#)), but also one of the most influential ones (Authors’ interview, Daniel Holder, Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), Belfast, 25.11.2021), acting both as a support and advocacy group. WAVE runs a number of self-support groups, including the so-called “Injured Group”, which has been instrumental in bringing about the Injured Pension and will thus be the focus of this analysis.

The Injured Group was formed in 2002, but at first failed to organise in a sustainable manner due to a lack of members and leadership. This only changed when Alan McBride, himself a survivor and a long-time campaigner for victims’ causes, joined as a group facilitator in 2008. At this point, previous engagements with TJ initiatives had proven inconclusive, leaving the injured with “a real sense of ‘we’ve been forgotten again, we’ve been ignored again, we’re invisible’” (Interview 24.11.2021). United by a shared feeling of having “been degraded and badly let down” (Interview 24.11.2021) by existing schemes, and with little progress in sight, the idea of a petition to raise awareness of the situation of the injured manifested, heralding the start of the group’s “Campaign for Recognition” in 2010. At first, the group just aimed for recognition of their grievances. Only later did the idea of a special pension for the injured firm up. Despite a promising start, it would however take the group more than a decade of continuous campaigning to succeed due to the complicated political situation in Northern Ireland.

Collective identity and framing: “find a compromise amongst ourselves”

Several factors are crucial to explain the success of the Injured Group’s campaign. First of all, a frame of inclusivity and unity was critical. Focusing on the shared experience of victimisation and shared grievances allowed the group to build a strong and distinct collective identity as “the injured”, bridging differences and divides between the members. As Paul Gallagher explained: “You had your grievances, right, but they didn’t become *our* grievances until you’ve actually seen other people with [the] same sorts of injuries. And that’s what made it then concrete” (Interview 24.11.2021; see also Gallagher 2021, 143–146). Finding agreement despite the diversity of the groups’ membership also seems to have been aided by the inclusive and reconciliatory outlook to victimhood and peacebuilding of many of the groups’ members, as reflected in the following quote:

I have been asked before, if the guy who shot me went out and was injured in the same way as me and left paralysed, would I want him to get a pension? I would say yes. [...] I mean the

¹⁹If not otherwise indicated, the information in the following chapter stem from the authors’ interview with Paul Gallagher, WAVE Injured Group, Belfast, 24.11.2021.

guy who shot me wasn't born to shoot me. He's a product of this place. [...] That's the way I see it and that's the way I feel others [have] seen it within the Injured Group. (Interview 24.11.2021)

Adopting an inclusive approach to victimhood in line with the legal definition of a victim set out in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006²⁰ as well as to reparations allowed the group to take a middle position open to compromise and adjustment, making it easier to convince different audiences and react to changing circumstances. This strategy of “play[ing] down the line by the middle” (Interview 24.11.2021) also helped to navigate the complex political landscape. Furthermore, the perception and framing of the Injured Group as “apolitical” compared to other survivor groups helped the Injured Group to enter talks with politicians from both sides:

Other groups were seen as being political. Especially [the] Republican side, they are just politicising it. Whereas we aren't, we always try to find a way through. Not to attack politicians, try to be courteous to them, and understanding of their problems [...] 'Cause you always had to deal with them, 'cause you needed them down the line. And I think that's the way WAVE worked as well. Trying to find a way forward that suits everybody. (Interview 24.11.2021)

This adoption of an “apolitical” positioning must also be seen in the wider context of the construction of a distinct group identity built around inclusivity and neutrality in distinction to other survivor groups through “boundary framing”. Coupled with the strategic choice to focus on reparations for the manageable group of the physically injured, and thus a feasible demand, this increased the success potential of their campaign.

Its inclusive approach did however not spare the Injured Group from disagreements, and heated debates – for instance, over the question of the eligibility of convicted perpetrators for reparations or the inclusion of the psychologically injured in the campaign – arose at times, even causing some members to leave. Evidence for movements' tendency to present themselves as a unified entity to the outside world (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 294f.), these tensions were however hidden from the public. As Gallagher explained: “we had to play this out amongst ourselves before we went public with it” (Interview 24.11.2021). To gloss over internal divides as well as to maintain a neutral position in a heated and politicised environment, the Injured Group for a long time also refused to publicly comment on contested questions of victimhood²¹:

[T]hat tactic for us then was to try and keep neutral even though behind the scenes some of us were ... we had to be neutral because we are cross-community, we had to find a compromise amongst ourselves. (Interview 24.11.2021)

While at times giving their struggle an academic veneer, the Injured Group mostly stayed away from more universal “master frames”, such as human rights discourse, and avoided framing their demand as a reparation, a term equated by many politicians with the admittance of guilt and hence highly politicised.

²⁰See The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006 (2006).

²¹While the group long maintained a position and strategy of neutrality, it is noteworthy that in 2016, due to the ongoing political stalemate that made the realisation of the scheme on other terms increasingly unlikely, the Injured Group changed its previous stance and publicly positioned itself with respect to the eligibility question, now pragmatically pushing for a scheme for “victims who suffered injuries through no fault of their own” (see Gallagher 2021, 257–261).

Repertoires of action: “go down the political route”

In its struggle for the pension, the Injured Group employed a wide range of repertoires. As a kick-off to the “Campaign for Recognition”, the group organised a petition drive across Northern Ireland, collecting 10.000 signatures over the course of two years.

More important than such overt actions aimed at the wider public, however, was to “go down the political route” (Interview 24.11.2021). From the very beginning, the Injured Group focused on lobbying political decision makers. In 2010, the group gave a first statement in front of the Northern Irish Assembly. Three years later, the Injured Group spoke again in Stormont, demanding an Injured pension (WAVE Trauma Centre [n.d.b](#)). In particular, negotiations behind closed doors were an important strategy to get politicians to move forward with the pension scheme. By shying away from public attention, the group sought to avoid the usual politicisation of debates that narrowed down political options.

However, “always suspicious” (Interview 24.11.2021) of Northern Irish politics, the group tried to raise awareness of their cause beyond Northern Ireland early on, most notably by engaging in meetings with Secretaries of State and Shadow Secretaries of State – demands to take on the Injured pension on a UK level were however turned down on the grounds that this was a devolved matter. Despite this resistance, following the once again suspension of Stormont institutions in 2017, the group decided to move their campaign from Stormont to the UK level. In 2018, the group made a final push and a delegation travelled to Westminster, successfully raising awareness of their cause in the House of Commons. A photo exhibition on the Injured in Westminster in 2019, that the group curated, further meetings with influential politicians (WAVE Trauma Centre [n.d.b](#)) and the successful lobbying of more MPs finally led the group to have “a sort of ground swell of support” (Interview 24.11.2021) in Westminster.

Strategic media engagement also played a pivotal role in raising awareness and maintaining public attention. In fact, “media became the main strategy” (Interview 24.11.2021) for the Injured Group. The group strategically adjusted their media appearance to attract maximum attention and empathy, playing on notions of victimhood when needed:

[O]ur story was a great story. [...] We'll go out and tell our sad stories [...] It was an act, you know what I mean? You had to put on a performance, really. [...] So, you had to be savvy, and you had to be in the know, you had to take these opportunities when they came. (Interview 24.11.2021)

While lobbying of politicians and a strategy of careful negotiation behind the scenes were at the heart of the Injured Group's approach, when this failed to produce the desired outcome, the group turned to the press to publicly expose and pressure politicians, “trying to shame them into it” and “to get the media on [their] side” (Interview 24.11.2021). Besides the regular media, the group also relied on social media. In 2018, the Injured Group launched the “Mention the Pension” social media campaign, calling on other civil society groups to include the Injured Pension in the consultation forms for the Stormont House Agreement (SHA), with the result that the Injured Pension came out as one of the top issues. Lastly, the group also used testimonial evidence to further their struggle. In 2008, WAVE published the first edition of the “Injured on

the Day” report (WAVE Trauma Centre [n.d.b](#)), a collection of testimonies of the Injured. Soon, “it became a lobbying tool, it became a tool to hand [to] the politicians to say ‘look, here is our stories, do something about it’” (Interview 24.11.2021). Individual members of the group have also successfully taken on a judicial review process in 2020 in reaction to the Executive Office’s rejection to implement the pension scheme (WAVE Trauma Centre 2020; High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland 2020).

The group’s strategy was complemented by a knowledge- and evidence-based approach. Through the commissioning of outputs such as a research report on the needs of the Injured and possible ways forward (see Breen-Smyth 2012), or a proposal for the layout of the pension scheme (see Magee 2019), the group intervened in public and political discourse and offered substantiated policy advice. Retreating to this kind of neutral scientific knowledge and “expert vocabulary” also helped to universalise and legitimise the struggle.

Resource mobilisation: “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know”

The Injured Group could not have succeeded without the resources at its disposal. In particular the ability to draw on existing structures was decisive. WAVE’s role as parent organisation was crucial in this regard. WAVE provided the group with material resources, including the financial means to run their campaign, logistical support and a roof over their heads. As a longstanding group with a good reputation, credibility and far-reaching networks, WAVE moreover provided the necessary socio-organisational and moral resources to access and influence politics. With WAVE at its back, the Injured Group was able to “lift the phone to whoever” (Interview 24.11.2021).

Human resources were another important factor. First and foremost, the campaign’s success was owed to the labour, skills, and experience of the group’s members and their perseverance, as well as Alan McBride’s leadership from 2008 onwards, which was key to “get the troops fired up” (Interview 24.11.2021). Expertise, both from WAVE’s side and from some of the group’s members, also contributed to the campaign’s success. As an organisation with longstanding advocacy experience, WAVE provided the Injured Group with valuable strategic advice, for instance regarding the “behind-the-scenes-diplomacy” (Interview 24.11.2021). With the aspiration of “[t]rying to become a machine” (Interview 24.11.2021), the group furthermore enhanced its organisational resources through capacity building, for example in the form of media training, and the optimisation of existing structures.

Falling into the domain of socio-organisational resources, lastly, networking and allies in politics, civil society, academia and state institutions were essential to advance the campaign. In particular Peter Hain, former Secretary of State and Member of the House of Lords,²² took on a key role in the group’s struggle, galvanising support for their cause in the House of Lords. The Injured Group also garnered support from other civil society groups across the board as well as a range of institutional actors and academics – “[s]o, you get this sort of sense of ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know’” (Interview 24.11.2021).

²²Peter Hain acted as Secretary of State of Northern Ireland from 2005 to 2007 and has been a Member of the House of Commons from 1991 to 2015 before becoming a member of the House of Lords in 2015.

Political opportunity structures: “the right drivers coming in at the right time”

Lastly, while the strategic positioning of the group, its resources and its choice of action forms were key, the campaign’s success also depended on favourable conditions. Especially the dissolution of the Northern Irish Assembly in 2017 and the ensuing standstill of Northern Irish politics proved to be a decisive moment in this regard, as it ended the blockade caused by the constant disagreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin. It was then that the group was able to move the campaign to the UK level and ultimately achieve the passage of a law to that effect. Moving the campaign to Westminster also allowed the group to break away from the rhythm of constant elections, that put Northern Irish politicians in a permanent election campaign mode and prevented any success. The final passage of the law, however, was again a question of making the most of political opportunity structures when they presented themselves, as well as of the right timing:

[A] year later on this in Westminster, would Boris Johnson’s government have done it? No. Whereas we got ours through the door, Johnson became Prime Minister a week later. [...] Because we knew that this was coming [...] And so did Peter Hain, and went: ‘This is our last chance, we can’t wait for them, because they’re, we need to get this on now’. (Interview 24.11.2021)

It should not be forgotten, however, that the dissolution of Stormont constituted not only an opening, but also the closure of a window of opportunity. By the end of 2016, the group was on the verge of achieving its goal of a three-party Private Members Bill over the heads of Sinn Féin and the DUP, who had blocked the process all those years before. This progress vanished into thin air in 2017. As the Injured Group’s example thus shows, the existence of political opportunity structures alone is not enough, the success also hinges on the ability to make clever use of key political events:

[Y]ou had the right drivers coming in at the right time. [...] So, ours [campaign] was lucky, it was lucky as well. But we were lucky to be right there to take the opportunities too. So, you make your own luck as well and you keep at it. (Interview 24.11.2021)

The War Widows’ Association and the struggle for equal pensions

The WWA was founded in 1971 by Jill Gee, a World War II (WWII) widow who started a campaign for a tax-free WWP, a demand that was met by the Thatcher government in 1979. Advocacy work has hence been at the core of the WWA from its inception, as former chairperson Mary Moreland points out: “it’s not a welfare organisation. It really is, and was founded as, a campaigning organisation” (Authors’ interview, Mary Moreland, Victims and Survivors Forum (VSF) & War Widows Association (WWA), Belfast, 10.12.2021, hereafter: Interview 10.12.2021).

While the association was originally set up to bring together the widows of British soldiers who had died during WWII (Lomas 1994, 219), it gradually opened up to include all widows of British Armed Forces personnel (Interview 10.12.2021). Obtaining equal pension rights for all war widows, “regardless of which war had produced their widowhood”, became the association’s core campaigning objective (Lomas 1994, 219). Today, the WWA counts around 2000 members across the UK, including widows of personnel

of the British Army and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR)²³ who lost their lives as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Its work centres around three pillars: campaign, care and remembrance (Interview 10.12.2021).

In what follows, we will focus on the WWA's campaigning work, which in recent years has centred on a specific problem with the WWP scheme, namely the withdrawal of pension rights in case of remarriage or cohabitation. While this rule was abolished in 2015 following the WWA's successful "Pensions for Life" campaign, the new legislation was not backdated, leaving an estimated 200–300 widows without reinstatement of their pension rights (Thurley and Kennedy 2021, 14), among them approximately thirty UDR widows (Bradfield 2020). One case that attracted particular political attention was that of Susan Rimmer, who was told by the administration that the only solution to reinstate her pension rights was to divorce her new partner and to remarry him (Black 2016; Thurley and Kennedy 2021, 14).²⁴ After eight years of lobbying and campaigning by, among others, the WWA, the Ministry of Defence announced in May 2023 that, instead of reinstating pension rights, it would provide a one-off payment of £87,500 "in recognition of those who forfeited their pensions prior to 2015" through a scheme that would be up and running by the end of the year (Ministry of Defence, Veterans UK, and The Rt Hon Dr. Andrew Murrison MP et al. 2023).²⁵ In their reaction to the media, representatives of the WWA expressed disappointment at the lack of full reinstatement of the pension rights, while at the same time welcoming "this long overdue" payment (BBC News 2023).

Collective identity and framing: "reinstatement of our pensions is our goal"

The WWA is a somewhat atypical victim group in the Northern Irish TJ landscape. Firstly, the association incorporates the war widows of the conflict in Northern Ireland into a wider universe of war widows of different (historical) conflicts. Its collective identity is hence based on a principle of universality rather than on the distinction of war widows of the conflict in Northern Ireland (War Widows' Stories, Moreland 2017). This principle of universality is reflected in the WWA's prognostic framing: overcoming inequalities in pensions remains its core demand (Interview 10.12.2021). While the demand for reinstatement concerns a rather small group of widows, the interests of this minority could be voiced more powerfully by inscribing them into the larger universe of war widows and their historical demands for "equal pension rights for all" that proved successful in the past. Secondly, the WWA forms part of the veterans' community, a group that is often overlooked when discussing the role of survivors in TJ, but which plays an important role in the contested Northern Irish victim landscape. As Lawther has pointed out, "for many unionists, members of the security forces who died during the conflict should sit at the apex of the hierarchy of victimhood in Northern Ireland" (Lawther 2022, 526), granting military bereaved more leverage in public discourse to defend their cause than family members of civilian victims.²⁶ At the same time, most veteran associations defend the interests of the former serving soldiers

²³Special infantry regiment of the British Army in Northern-Ireland between 1970–1992, largely consisting of part-time volunteers with a loyalist/Protestant background.

²⁴See also: Compensation for War Widows, Early Day Motion 1133 (2016).

²⁵At the time of writing, the scheme was not yet open for applications.

²⁶Jankowitz points to the importance of the 1998 report by Kenneth Bloomfield, then Victims Commissioner of Northern Ireland, which honors the sacrifice of the security forces while only granting scant attention to civilian victims in establishing this hierarchy (Bloomfield 1998 in: Jankowitz 2018, 223).

themselves. According to Mary Moreland, it was not until the mid-1980s that the WWA was accepted as an integral part of the veterans' community and was, for example, allowed to participate in the parades on Remembrance Day (War Widows' Stories, Moreland 2017).

The construction of a collective identity as war widows is primarily a top-down process: one becomes a war widow by being identified as a beneficiary of the WWP by the state (War Widows' Stories, Moreland 2017). The collective identity of the WWA is therefore to a large extent linked to the WWP. Kate Thomas describes this connection as follows: "It's funny, with the war widow's thing. Am I a war widow? Because, you know, I'm not getting the pension anymore so when I stopped getting the pension, I thought 'Oh, so I'm not a war widow anymore'" (War Widows' Stories, Thomas 2019). For Mary Moreland, being labelled as a war widow by the government primarily constitutes an external act of identification that serves to administer compensation policies, rather than an act of self-identification (Interview 10.12.2021). In addition to being identified as a beneficiary of the WWP by the government, the collective identity of the WWA builds upon their and their partners' close connection to the military. The UDR in particular has created a strong sense of belonging for its members and their families:

Because of the situation in Northern Ireland at that stage, you tended to socialise with people that you worked with, so the social aspect of our life was really around the Ulster Defence Regiment and the chaps that served. It was very much within that community. (War Widows' Stories, Moreland 2017)

This sense of community was maintained through widowhood, with the welfare service of the UDR bringing together bereaved families of service personnel and organising, for example, collective summer holidays (Interview 10.12.2021).

While, as stated above, the WWA's collective identity is closely tied to the WWP, there is a difference in how the pension is framed by the government on the one hand, and by the war widows on the other. In the eyes of the government, the WWP in the first place constitutes a benefit intended to compensate for the economic loss of a husband. The widows themselves, however, while welcoming the financial benefit as an act of care by the government, consider the money secondary to the acknowledgment of the sacrifices made by their loved ones. Apart from its monetary component, the pension hence has an important moral dimension (Interview 10.12.2021). Linda McHugh explains:

[I]t left me deeply saddened when my pension stopped, to me, it was a tangible link to John and an acknowledgement of John's sacrifice from the government. [...] There is never a value placed on a life however a compensation payment is a strong indication that shows care and acknowledgment. (Written Response to Authors, Linda McHugh, South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF), 02.12.2021, hereafter: Written Response 02.12.2021).

This moral dimension is crucial to understanding the war widows' motivation for campaigning: "I felt compelled to fight for the equality and acknowledgement we deserved and reinstatement of our pensions is our goal" (Written Response 02.12.2021).

Repertoires of action: "meeting the right people"

An aspect that immediately draws the attention when looking at the repertoires of action deployed by the WWA is that, similar to the WAVE Injured Group, the association's

main strategy is to work behind the scenes, with lobbying and networking at the heart of its repertoire:

I think the best strategy is just meeting the right people and making the right contacts to campaign [...]. I don't think chaining yourself to railings and standing in the middle of the street and gluing yourself to the road, really, that's been done, dusted, and irritates the public more, I don't think you get support through that. (Interview 10.12.2021)

At the core of the WWA's lobbying work is an evidence-based approach: "The only way to change things is to influence policy, and the only way to influence policy is to do research and provide the evidence" (Interview 10.12.2021). One of the strengths of the WWA has been its access political figures through successful networking into the higher echelons of power:

A lot of that is networking, mostly into the government, mostly into the MOD [Ministry of Defence], mostly into senior civil service there. [...] I had a conversation with Boris Johnson 2019 at Remembrance [Day] because he was at a reception. So, it is using that, I mean, I got access to the archbishop of Canterbury, using connections that you have to get you access into that and again providing the evidence. (Interview 10.12.2021)

The media furthermore played an important role in drawing attention to the WWA's demands. In 2016, for example, MP Greg Mulholland tabled a motion on the reinstatement of the pensions (Compensation for War Widows, Early Day Motion [1133 2016](#)) and invited Susan Rimmer and other war widows to Westminster for a meeting with the Ministry of Defence, an event that was highly mediatised (War Widows' Stories, Rimmer [2019](#)). Like the WAVE Injured Group, the WWA is acutely aware of the media's depiction of certain images of victimhood:

From my experience with the association, when the media were looking for anybody, you know: 'can we have a blond, tall, slim war widow who actually might cry on queue because that's the image we want to portray'. Now they didn't literally ask for that but that's what they were asking for, you could read between the lines. (Interview 10.12.2021)

Resource mobilisation: "a bolshy Irish woman at the head"

The WWA has no paid staff or office premises and receives no public funding. Its only financial resources come from donations (Interview 10.12.2021). As a voluntary organisation, the WWA's most important resources are hence human resources, and it is the leadership and commitment of certain individuals that constitutes the association's driving force. When asked what has been the key to the success of the WWA's campaigns, Mary Moreland said: "I suppose having a bolshy Irish woman at the head [laughs]. Someone who's not afraid to confront a politician and say: 'you are wrong'" (Interview 10.12.2021).

Apart from the WWA's own human resources, the support of other organisations within the victim sector has been crucial to keep the demands of the war widows on the political agenda. In particular, the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF), one of Northern Ireland's most influential Unionist victim organisations, has been an important ally of the WWA, as it defends a discourse of "innocent" and "deserving" victims that honours the sacrifices of the security forces (Lawther [2022](#), 522). SEFF's chairman Kenny Donaldson, who also leads the lobby and advocacy group "Innocent Victims United"

(IVU), regularly spoke out in the media about the reinstatement of the WWP (see e.g. Black 2016; Shropshire Star 2020) and was present at the event in Westminster in 2016 to support the WWA's campaign (Written Response 02.12.2021). In 2021, SEFF launched a Facebook campaign, demanding to "treat our heroic War Widows with respect", featuring a video testimony of Susan Rimmer (SEFF Victims & Survivors 2022).

The WWA furthermore collaborated with the former Commissioner for Victims and Survivors to compile a number of testimonies of war widows for British MP Dr. Julian Lewis from the Conservative Party, who brought the issue of pension reinstatement to the House of Commons by presenting a motion in 2020.²⁷ Mary Moreland is also a member of the "Victims and Survivors Forum", a discussion and consultation forum of the "Commission for Victims and Survivors" – hereby representing the interest of war widows of the conflict in the most important governmental body concerned with survivors' issues in Northern Ireland.

Lastly, the WWA also has access to academic networks and actively collaborates with scholars from the Liverpool John Moores University on the War Widows' Stories,²⁸ a project aimed at preserving the heritage of the war widows and raising "awareness of the everyday lives of war widows" (War Widows' Stories 2016).

Political opportunity structures: "when the time is right it will happen"

Over the decades of campaigning, the WWA has made small gains towards achieving its goal of equal pensions. Mary Moreland states that "like dealing with any government department it's a long process, it's slow, it's tedious, you have to keep chipping away like a stone mason" (Interview 10.12.2021). Finding the right political moment has been crucial in this respect, and the WWA sees its struggle in the medium term:

The campaign for pensions for life that was probably going for fifteen, twenty years; this current reinstatement [campaign] is probably only six years [...] It's still at its infancy to a certain extent, the campaigning and lobbying. When the time is right it will happen. We just need to be there when the time is right. (Interview 10.12.2021)

Over the past few years, several windows of opportunity arose through alliances with MPs who brought the reinstatement campaign into the House of Commons and emphasised the urgency of the matter.²⁹ While in early 2020 the WWA seemed close to achieving the objectives of the reinstatement campaign, the campaign got stalled once again due to changes in leadership within the association as well as shifts within the government:

I think we had a momentum going that we've lost, and I think after Christmas there will be a reshuffle and probably mid-year Boris [Johnson] will stand down and there will be another reshuffle and another reshuffle. And when that happens you really lose momentum, so you need to be there, you need to be hammering on the door all the time. You need to make a pain of yourself basically. I mean that's what campaigning and lobbying is all about. (Interview 10.12.2021)

While the political will to provide full reinstatement of pension rights remains absent, as already pointed out, the government has promised to open a scheme providing a lump sum payment to those left behind by the 2015 legislation by the end of 2023 (Ministry of

²⁷War Widow's Pension Scheme (2020).

²⁸See <http://www.warwidowsstories.org.uk> for further information on the project.

²⁹War Widow's Pension Scheme (2020).

Defence, Veterans UK, and The Rt Hon Dr. Andrew Murrison MP 2023). However, in early 2024, the WWA expressed its anger at a last-minute change of the eligibility criteria for the so-called ex-gratia payment.³⁰ The campaign for reinstatement currently continues under the name “Campaign 300”, referring to the estimated number of war widows that are still waiting for their pension rights to be restored.³¹

Conclusion

Victims’ and survivors’ interests, needs and identities are a central concern in research on TJ and wider processes of dealing with the past. While survivors’ collective forms of mobilisation and claim-making can easily be understood as contentious politics, survivor groups have rarely been considered as collectively organised contentious actors by TJ scholars. Moreover, victims’ rights are both the result of and an instrument for collective mobilisation within the framework of human rights politics in general and reparation politics in particular. In this article, we have argued that SMT provides us with a better understanding of this connection between victims’ rights and collective action. More precisely, we applied four concepts of SMT to gain a better understanding of the collective agency and role of victim groups as claim-making civil society actors in reparation politics. The application of this framework to analyse the collective identity-building and framing, repertoires of action, resource mobilisation, and political opportunity structures of both the WAVE Injured Group and the WWA in post-conflict Northern Ireland, has demonstrated its added value in four interrelated ways.

Firstly, the operationalisation of the chosen concepts facilitates an analytical assessment of how, why, when and with which agenda victim groups organise in the wake of armed conflict. Applying the core concepts of SMT allows to systematically unravel the different internal and external factors that influence the mobilisation of survivor groups in transitional societies. It enables us to take into account both facilitating and constraining factors, thus advancing a global understanding of what shapes survivors’ collective action. Paying closer attention to the decisive parameters and dynamics at play through the application of the SMT framework also helps to better comprehend the varied outcomes of different survivor groups’ mobilisation around TJ. Combined, the four concepts allow to draw a comprehensive, yet detailed picture of survivor groups’ struggles.

Secondly, looking at survivors through a social movement lens allows us to see them as complex and strategic political actors, and shifts the focus back to their agency as drivers of TJ policies such as reparations. As such, it also points to the impact and mobilisation power that survivor groups can achieve when they organise collectively. The examples of the WAVE Injured Group and the WWA show how concrete results with regard to compensation payments can be obtained through victim groups’ persistent campaigning. The Victims’ Payment Scheme would not have been established if the Injured Group had not worked relentlessly towards its goal and exerted pressure on political actors for years. The

³⁰The Ex Gratia Pension Payment was discussed in the Lord Chamber on 5 March 2024. During this discussion, the vice-president of the WWA stated that “it appears that it was decided late in the day that the ex gratia payment would not be for all those who forfeited their war widow’s pension but for those who forfeited an attributable pension before 2000” and that this sparked “huge anger among war widows”. 836. War Widows: Ex Gratia Pension Payment (2024).

³¹<https://warwidows.org.uk/campaign-300/>.

WWA's sustained "Pensions for Life" campaign already proved fruitful in 2015, and the association's persistent lobbying on behalf of those left behind by the 2015 legislation succeeded in persuading political actors to provide them with a lump sum payment. The successes achieved by the WWA and WAVE in campaigning on behalf of respectively the military bereaved and the injured may inspire future mobilisation for reparations for civilian bereavement, which until today are still lacking.

Thirdly, studying different groups of survivors of the same conflict by conducting a within-case analysis and offering an in-depth analysis of their respective struggles by applying a SMT framework reveals the diversity of survivors' identities, strategies and claims rather than generalising their needs and interests during a given TJ process. Analysing survivor groups' identities and aspirations across the spectrum uncovers the varied roles that survivor groups can adopt in transitional settings. As survivor groups seek to shape TJ processes to their own ends, they may advance or impede official TJ processes. Rather than painting a homogeneous or idealised picture of survivors in post-conflict contexts, a closer reading of survivor groups' distinct struggles can also highlight potential frictions between different victim communities in a given context, expose diverging understandings of and agendas around TJ, and facilitate "an interrogation of the positionality of victimhood" (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013, 505). The approach proposed in this article is thus an important addition to the growing TJ literature that seeks to challenge state-centric, simplistic and normative notions underpinning reparation politics by broadening and complexifying the understanding of the different actors involved in reparation politics. To date, existing scholarship has mostly focused on non-state actors responsible for reparations (see e.g. Moffett 2021) as well as beneficiaries of reparations (e.g. including "complex" victims) (see e.g. Moffett 2015). Besides drawing our attention to the diversity and complexity of the victim landscape, the applied concepts of SMT also enable us to understand survivor groups "from within" and to sketch a more nuanced picture of the different aspects of a group's collective identity and its campaigning work. This bottom-up understanding of survivors' claims is particularly relevant when it comes to reparation policies in the context of TJ, as survivors' perception of what constitutes an acceptable compensation is essential to achieve a reparative effect. Applying the SMT framework and thereby paying closer attention to the different needs and demands of survivors can thus also help to move towards more victim-oriented TJ policies.

Fourthly, and directly related to our third point, current understandings of the role of survivors as civil society actors are driven by a normative liberal human-rights based approach that distinguishes between "good"/"civil" (i.e. acting within a human rights framework and supportive of the aims of TJ) and "bad"/"uncivil" civil society actors (i.e. acting within a different moral framework and possibly resisting or contradicting the aims of TJ) (Jones and Adou Djané 2018, 3). The same is true, to some extent, for the research on TJ "from below", which tends to stress the positive role of grassroots activism and meaningful victim participation (see e.g. Firchow and Selim 2022; McEvoy and McGregor 2008; Tamayo Gomez 2022). Such a normative approach risks overlooking survivor groups who mobilise based on a different moral framework than that of human rights, as well as ignoring the complexity of victimhood.³² Interestingly, both survivor groups studied in this paper did not primarily embed their struggle in a human

³²On the complexity of victimhood and the challenges of inclusion and exclusion see Bernath (2016).

rights discourse: the Injured Group avoided it for strategic political reasons, whereas the WWA forms part of a veterans' community whose identity is mostly based on other values, such as patriotism. An SMT-inspired approach to the role of survivors as civil society actors in transitional societies can help us to escape this "normative trap", to move beyond the "limits of the liberal approach to civil society which dominates TJ policy and scholarship" (Jones and Adou Djané 2018, 8), and to include groups in the analysis that would otherwise be overlooked.

In sum, we argue that applying a social movement lens to understand the role of survivors can have an important added value for broadening research perspectives on the role of civil society in TJ. It also allows us to understand TJ as a contested and often politicised process in which actors combine their interpretations of the past with strategic goals, such as the enforcement of material compensation. As the empirical findings presented in this paper only scratch the surface of a wide variety of groups organising and mobilising in post-conflict societies around the globe, further research into other case studies can help us to explore in more depth how and to what extent survivor groups act as contentious political actors in the context of TJ processes and what role SMT can have in helping us make sense of survivors' collective agency.

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ORCID

Pia Falschebner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4657-1007>

Eva Willems  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1472-7158>

Thorsten Bonacker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5325-2816>

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