

121 Stories: The impact of gender on participation in Irish traditional music

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Abstract

This article reports on findings from an open online call in 2018, for experiences relating to gender in an Irish traditional music context. 121 anonymous responses were received from 83 people, mostly women. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) resulted in the identification of two main themes to describe ways in which gender affects participation in Irish traditional music: systems, causes and examples of gender inequality, and personal experiences of the effects of gender inequality. The research demonstrates that the mechanisms and structures of the Irish traditional music scene continue to privilege the contribution of men. More generalised societal sexism is present in traditional music contexts and affects participation for women. Impacts of gender are found to be current, complex and longstanding; are present in all contexts in Irish traditional music; affect children and adults; and are not confined to the professional sphere. The study also revealed a range of attitudes to the discussion of gender in Irish traditional music. Some implications of the work are discussed in the final section.

Keywords: gender, Irish traditional music, women

Research aims and context

This research aims to increase understanding of the ways in which gender affects people's experience in Irish traditional music, and the behaviours and contexts that contribute to gender inequality, at all levels of participation, in Irish traditional music.

O'Shea (2008a, 2008b) and Slominski (2013, 2018, 2020) examine gender in Irish traditional music through analyses of the sociological, cultural, historical and nationalist contexts in which it exists. They highlight the power differentials involved, and the role of the places in which traditional music is played. In November 2017, I began work on a performance piece in response to my own experiences of sexism and misogyny, particularly in Irish traditional music, in the course of over twenty years of participation as a musician and sound engineer (Monaghan 2018a). While working on the piece, I encountered many individual stories from peer musicians that alone could not support general conclusions, but taken together warranted examination. I noted that some people were afraid to share their experiences for a range of reasons, including fear of backlash, consequences for their career, rejection by the community, respect for the tradition and accusations of bringing the tradition into disrepute. In parallel with the global feminist movements of 2017 onwards, FairPlé, a campaign advocating for gender balance in Irish traditional and folk music began in February 2018. FairPlé prompted opposition and debate in the Irish traditional music community, including the assertion from some musicians that they did not perceive gender to be an issue at all (Williams 2020: 25-26). In the context of these discussions and debates, and more general national and international awareness of the effect of gender on music making and cultural production (see for example Ní Fhuartháin in this issue; Keychange 2020;

Sisario 2018; Kernodle 2014; Scharff 2017 and Europe Jazz Network 2018) I sought to analyse the impact of gender on participation in Irish traditional music. An anonymous online questionnaire was used to gather and collate current experiences in a structured and protected way, and this paper presents an analysis and discussion of the responses submitted.

Data collection

The online questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions presented via Qualtrics (2020). In the first text field, "Tell your story", participants were invited to share their experience of a time when they "perceived gender to be an issue" in an Irish traditional music context. In the second, participants were asked for "any other comments on this topic, or suggestions on what might be needed to address any gender issue you see in Irish traditional music". Data were also collected on participants' demographic details¹ and their level of involvement in Irish traditional music. The study received ethical approval from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Music Ethics Committee.

Participants were recruited via social media. A textual description of the research and a video call (Monaghan 2018b) were shared via multiple online platforms. A pilot questionnaire was live from 13 to 24 July 2018, and the public questionnaire from 24 July to 1 November 2018. 123 submissions were received, of which two were later withdrawn by the respondent, resulting in 121 responses from 83 people. Respondent details are shown in Table 1. Responses came mostly from those who consider themselves experienced or expert in Irish traditional music (87%); 25% of respondents were full-time professional musicians or singers. The majority identified their gender as female (83%), and their ethnicity as white (96%).

Table 1: Respondent details.

	Number (N = 83)	Percentage
Age		
18-24	9	10.84
25-34	27	32.53
35-44	20	24.10
45-54	16	19.28
55-64	9	10.84
65-74	2	2.41
75 or older	0	0.00
Gender		
Female	69	83.13
Male	10	12.05
Prefer not to say	2	2.41
Gender non-conforming	1	1.20
Undisclosed	1	1.20
Ethnicity		
White	80	96.39
Thai/Chinese	1	1.20
American Indian	1	1.20
Undisclosed	1	1.20
Role		
Singer	7	8.43
Musician	34	40.96
Both	41	49.40
Neither	1	1.20
Experience in Irish Traditional Music		
Beginner Musician / Singer	1	1.20
Intermediate Musician / Singer	8	9.64
Experienced Musician / Singer	44	53.01
Expert Musician / Singer	28	33.73
Not a Musician / Singer	2	2.41
Play Professionally in Irish Traditional Music		
Full-time	21	25.30
Part-time	25	30.12
Sometimes	26	31.33
Never	11	13.25

Of 104 responses that included a date range, most (69%) referred to events in the decade from “2010-present”, while others noted their experiences ranged from the 1970s to date. Table 2 shows the story locations (not necessarily the location of the respondent). 64% of submissions referred to Ireland. Locations marked “Other” included Europe, Asia, Australia and North America.

Table 2: Story location.

Where did this story happen?	Number (N = 121)	Percentage
Ireland	77	63.64
Scotland	4	3.31
England	7	5.79
Wales	1	0.83
USA	14	11.57
Other	18	14.88

Data Analysis

Responses to both open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis, in the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This paper provides a broad overview of the whole data set, its complexity and inter-relating issues, rather than focusing on the relative incidence of themes. All responses were read and re-read for familiarisation, the submission order randomised, and each numbered 1-121. Each response was coded to describe the response content: 149 codes were generated and these were then sorted into themes and subthemes. Codes were data-driven and identified based on the content, without trying to match to a pre-existing coding frame (ibid.). As further codes were identified, the data were systematically reviewed to ensure all content was represented in the coding. A data and methodology audit was carried out with a second researcher.

Excerpts from the collection quoted in this article are labelled with the response number and for reasons of space only longer excerpts contain contextual information and age range of the respondent. My expectation was that the questionnaire and all responses would be available to view and listen to online at the Irish Traditional Music Archive. I anonymised submissions and obtained consent for the publication and dissemination of text. Recordings were made of the responses and an audio archive produced, which was voiced by independent volunteers.² However, the ethical and professional consequences of this for all involved remain sensitive and complex, and have been part of the challenge of this work throughout. The #Misefosta campaign (Murphy 2020) and subsequent media attention renders the careful consideration of these factors even more critical. Though the housing of the full collection is therefore as yet undecided it will be made available in future. The collection of responses is rich and would support further analysis.

Results

Respondents' experiences of gender affecting participation in Irish traditional music can be understood in relation to two themes: a) systems, causes and examples of gender inequality; and b) personal experiences of the effects of gender inequality. Each theme is comprised of a number of sub-themes, describing collections of related codes. The theme 'systems, causes and examples of gender inequality' comprises the following sub-themes:

- Aspects specific to the Irish traditional music scene
- Mechanisms of the Irish traditional music industry
- Instrumentation
- Sexism and gender roles in society manifested in the Irish traditional music scene
- Assault, aggression and gendered power dynamics
- Physical appearance and image

- Relationships and family life directly affecting participation

The second theme collated the effects of gender inequality as evidenced through personal experiences and its subthemes are:

- Emotional cost, mental load and vulnerability
- Silencing
- Isolation
- Learned behaviour and challenging established norms

Both themes are explored in greater detail in the following sections. In addition, there are a number of more general outcomes of note. Fifty-nine respondents reported that the gendered difficulty they experienced and described in their response was ongoing or longstanding, or had built up over time. Some respondents noted that there were more men in traditional music, and that more men were hired for gigs. Others highlighted the disparity in gender balance in education compared to other areas of life—that equal or a greater number of women were learning in university or in traditional music classes, but this was not reflected in wider traditional music practice.

A) Systems, causes and examples of gender inequality

Aspects specific to the Irish traditional music scene

Respondents' experiences demonstrate that the mechanisms and structures of the Irish traditional music scene privilege the contribution of men. Nine responses contained an assertion that women are generally given less respect than men, nine related gender bias in traditional music to an older generation of men, and nine associated a style of playing with gender. The traditional music community is described in some responses as reluctant to adapt in ways that might make it more accessible to women, and reluctant to embrace change in general. Responses mentioned a legacy of instrument design by or for men, as in this excerpt, from a flute player: "The current traditional instrument design was based around larger hands (men's hands mainly); it's discouraging that this tradition is so reluctant to accept different designs to be more accessible for more people" (#76). Discourses on Irish traditional music often privilege its history and established characteristics (Vallely 2011: 687-689; Breathnach 1977: 88-94; Slominski 2020: 135-152). Responses demonstrate that this is used to give priority to "the music" (#7) or "the tradition" (#46) or "etiquette" (#29) at the expense of the people involved in it—in this research, specifically women:

Singing Circles are also part of traditional music. Love them but virtually all jokes/funny stories told by men over 55 involve women being fat, belligerent, hairy or expensive to keep. (#101, female intermediate singer, 45-54)

After a year or two, the other girl on the gig politely said to him that she had a couple of new tunes that she would like to try out, to which he responded, "this is a pub and people really need to hear music with BALLS in it, I'm horsing it out here, we're grand". (#70, female experienced singer, 35-44)

The session is in some respects at the heart of traditional music participation. While it is often perceived as a welcoming and egalitarian environment (Kaul 2007; O'Shea 2008a), for women in this study it is not always so:

I gave up on that particular session. I thought fuck them, if they want to keep it all for themselves, they're welcome to it. No need for me to get stressed out and put myself through that every week just to get a few tunes. (#83, female intermediate musician, 55-64)

Thirty-one responses mention sessions when describing a gendered experience. In seventeen responses, sessions are explicitly presented as uncomfortable contexts:

I remember once my female friends and I hiding our instruments under the table we were so intimidated by a session in a particular pub... I have actually in some respects now

fallen out of love with traditional music as it was too difficult to be accepted and play along. The amount of stamina and brass neck I think you need to have as a female to persevere to become admitted to that world is more than I have or have the time to muster up. You never get any encouragement. It's a macho scene. I have been left with a bitter taste in my mouth many times and so with sadness have allowed my talent to dissipate somewhat and no longer really bother with sessions or anything like that. (#29, female intermediate musician, 35-44)

Several aspects of Irish traditional music teaching and transmission are raised in the data. Respondents noted that women often participate as teachers, and in some places form the core of the learning and development of Irish traditional music. Respondents observed that women frequently take care of administration and other organisational roles, while remaining under-represented at sessions and in the professional sphere. Eight responses described an instance of gender affecting the learning or development experience in Irish traditional music as a child: "I started playing bagpipes at the age of 9. I remember being told by the teacher (ex-army as most pipers were) at age 12-ish: 'Girls can't play pipes, they haven't the lung capacity'" (#63).

Learning from peers and previous generations is an integral part of the transmission of Irish traditional music, and a strong association with, or status within, Irish traditional music can run in families (Cawley 2013). The contributions of some of the best players and families are revered, and there are centres of power, as there are in any community (ibid.). However, respondents described that this power was not always considered or understood by the holder, was not always handled responsibly, and was sometimes used to cause harm. Twenty responses mentioned a powerful or prominent man in traditional music, and four mentioned a powerful family: "I've been told 'you do not want to get on the wrong side of this man and his family'. They are considered Irish music royalty" (#6). However, family connections were also identified as a buffer for some women, shielding them from some effects of gender bias, or lessening their impact.

Some traditional music contexts are closely associated with alcohol use. Alcohol was mentioned in eleven responses, either because it was used as compensation for music playing, or was being consumed at the event. Alcohol was given to male musicians as a gift or in return for services while not offered to women in the same context, and alcohol consumption has been described as a factor making the traditional music environment less safe or enjoyable for women. Alcohol is used as a currency in Irish traditional music, and access to trade in that currency, or even accessing the contexts in which it is exchanged, is not equal with respect to gender:

I was one of two women in a band of 12 for a special gig at our local music venue. We were on backing vocals that night, standing to the front of the stage. The owner sent up a round of drinks. 10 drinks—for the lads, nothing for us. And again. And again. As if we weren't there. I didn't give a fuck about the drink—it was about not being considered as part of the band. The two women were invisible as musicians. (#84, female experienced musician and singer, 35-44)

Mechanisms of the Irish traditional music industry

In the professional sphere, respondents reported current music industry practices exacerbating, facilitating or perpetuating gender inequality. Some of these resulted from the lack of transparency in opportunities:

I have been told a male musician was chosen over me as the project involved gigs away from home. Since the project was just two musicians, he didn't want to travel with "a young girl" (I was hitting 30 at the time) as "people might talk". (#102, female experienced musician, 25-34)

Some showed blatant professional discrimination, including a gender pay gap, although the realities of self-employment in music renders this difficult for practitioners

to establish. Respondents noted a lack of code of practice or protection in Irish traditional music.

An agent we really wanted to work with balked when he heard I was getting married. He said I needed to let him know if I wanted to have children. That I can do whatever I like, but he didn't want to put time, money and resources into someone who would cancel a tour last minute, that I had to be really committed. Everyone else in my band was married, some had kids. No one stuck up for me. I said nothing. I was so shocked, but afterwards when I roared about it one of the guys said: "Well, you can kind of see what he means; I know it's shitty but I get it". He was powerful and influential and we stood to make good money with him. (#48, female expert musician and singer, 25-34)

As an independent artist, self-managed, I was pleased to draw the interest of a promoter who was enthusiastic about the prospect of setting up gigs. However, this didn't transpire—and for that I don't blame him in the least as I understand how the market works—and that demand makes bookings. His feedback, though, was harder to digest—which is that people don't want to pay money to see girl singer songwriters. (#69, female experienced singer, 45-54)

I was continually treated as a prop. At one gig the guitarist insisted my fiddle be unplugged so I was basically miming throughout the gig. It was humiliating. (#106, female expert musician and singer, 35-44)

Instrumentation

Fourteen responses were specific to a particular instrument. Some respondents noted that singers in professional contexts were mostly women, with consequences for that singer as often the only woman on tour:

On tour as the only female with an all male band, we were collecting a visiting guitar player one morning. He hopped into the van and started relating how great a time he had had the night before at the lap dancing club. Gesturing with his hands the size of the woman's breasts. "Ah jaysus you should have seen her". One of the other band members made eyes in my direction, sliding his finger across his throat. The younger guitar player looked puzzled but stopped. I continued with my knitting down the back of the van, seething. (#94, female expert musician and singer, 45-54)

Other examples include female flute players either being advised to get smaller (and quieter) flutes to suit their hands when they would have liked to buy a standard one, or being told the solution was to practise more on a standard instrument, when they wanted to buy a smaller design of flute to suit their smaller hands. Respondents highlighted ways in which conventions associated with certain instruments in the tradition create assumptions that restricted their potential, both when they were children and as adults. Some instruments such as the uilleann pipes or guitar were experienced by respondents to be mostly played by men, and women players of these instruments reported feeling greater pressure and scrutiny: "I am so fed up that it is so frequently assumed that I will be a bad guitarist because guitar is 'not a woman's instrument'" (#104). Or, they endured repeated assumptions that they played another instrument, sometimes with uncomfortable remarks, and always at a cost to their energy, development or enjoyment:

I was a bit late so the teacher and other participants were already seated. All male. Teacher looks up and said to me "the flute class is next door". I said "I'm here for a pipes class". My case wasn't visible. Awkward. (#75, female experienced musician, 25-34)

Sexism and gender roles in society manifested in the Irish traditional music scene

The second most common code throughout, assigned to seventy-one responses, was the evidence of a complex gender bias in society manifesting itself in Irish traditional music. This code was assigned when the respondent explicitly made reference to gender as a societal issue as well as in Irish traditional music, but also

when the respondent described an incident that was common in general society, not specific to traditional music, but happening in a traditional music context. For example:

I attended a pipes class for the first time at Scoil Éigse, the All-Ireland Fleadh summer school. The teacher was in his 20s, male. All the rest of the pipers in the class were male, it was an advanced class so most of them were older. I was the only female, about 13 at the time. They all seemed to know one another, a few of them were from Dublin and attended Na Píobairí Uilleann classes. It was all very laddish. One guy in particular would roll in mid-morning most days, there was banter with the teacher. A lot of sexual innuendo and drunken tales. I was so uncomfortable the whole time. (#5, female experienced musician, 25-34)

In fifty responses, an incident happened in public with no expectation of negative consequences. This points to a culture of permission, or normalisation of sexism in society generally, but also within Irish traditional music:

It was very clear that my being accepted in these male-dominated groups was dependent on my acquiescence to this type of behaviour (or at least it was evident that I certainly couldn't challenge the behaviour if I was going to be accepted as part of the group). I got very disheartened and avoided sessions for a long time as a result. (#21, female experienced musician and singer, 25-34)

This normalisation is not confined to interactions between adults; the following example happened while the respondent was a teenager: "At a practice one of our male tutors said that having me as 'eye candy' for the adjudicators and audience was a bonus" (#68).

Women respondents described being penalised for the same behaviour as men. When women displayed similar attributes, they were viewed negatively: "being categorized as 'fiery' or 'a battle-axe' or 'a handful' where my male counterparts with similar management skills would be considered 'confident' or 'well organized' or 'proactive' or 'detailed'" (#37).

Some respondents struggled to articulate exactly what was amiss in the situation they were describing. As a result, they had difficulty in pointing out the problem, could not say categorically that something happened because of their gender, and often let it go unchallenged, despite stating with confidence that the same thing simply wouldn't happen to men, or doesn't happen as often to men:

...it is just an example of how you constantly have to negotiate your space as a professional female musician so as not to bruise the ego of others in a male dominated space. It wouldn't have happened if we were male lead musicians. (#81, female expert musician, 25-34)

Some reported a lack of outward recognition of women's contribution generally, in both professional and non-professional spheres: "Just want to mention my lack of recognition when playing in a room full of men. They get the props, I get nothing" (#36) and "The women are often marginalized at best and abused at worst" (#19).

Forty-three of the responses described an instance of unconscious bias in which women were negatively impacted without being deliberately discriminated against. Several respondents reported that male colleagues or peers would not necessarily notice anything problematic. This had consequences for the way women responded to what was happening, and their options for seeking change:

I co-lead a band with a male colleague. The majority of the band are male musicians, we have around 25% female musicians. I have on many occasions directed the band in rehearsals and at various times during this direction some of the men will look to my male colleague and 1. blatantly ask him (in front of me and the rest of the band) what he wants the band to do as if I have not spoken at all 2. look for assurance that what I have just asked of them is what he wants (as if I have spoken out of turn) 3. screw their faces up making the inference that "why does she think she runs the band?" And one of the most annoying things about this is that I had to take my co-director away and tell him this was happening. He didn't notice it!!! The women in the band noticed but none of the

males. My confidence slowly deteriorated throughout that time. (#67, female expert musician and singer, 45-54)

In four responses, a confidence disparity between men and women was considered to affect advancement in Irish traditional music. Confidence deteriorated as a result of some respondents' experience of participation, or in some cases was deliberately eroded. In addition, women described the need to do or achieve more to get the same recognition as men in Irish traditional music. This demonstrates that as confidence drops it becomes harder to challenge discrimination, especially if it is not acknowledged as such.

Assault, aggression and gendered power dynamics

Women participating in Irish traditional music suffer the effects of gendered power dynamics, male violence, domination and aggression, including sexual violence. Eleven responses recounted a sexual assault, and sixteen sexual harassment. Twenty-one responses contained a sexual innuendo or comment, and thirty-one evidenced the general objectification of women: "Overheard a guy addressing my band members in a neighbouring dressing room: 'So which one of ye is banging the fiddle player?' I don't even know where to start with how humiliating that is." (#41). There are examples of a general power disparity affecting women's participation, which is at times deliberately exploited:

When...invited me to his house to discuss my participation in a festival that was upcoming that he was part of the programming board, as a young singer I was thrilled. He started the evening with talks about my singing and songwriting and commended by efforts in certain areas. At about the time that I was due to leave (he was my lift back to a bus back to the city), he had gone to his room got changed into a bathrobe and tried to get me to take a bath with him. He would have been nearly as old as my father at this stage and I was a very confused young aspiring musician as to how the evening had taken this type of turn. I asked to be taken back to the bus which he refused. He tried to take advantage of me in many ways that evening and when I refused on all accounts he got silent and passive aggressive. He didn't offer me anywhere to sleep apart from his own bed as the last bus now was gone, and I waited until the morning sitting on his couch until he silently drove me back to Dublin. He never offered me a spot on that bill and after telling the story to another female musician at the time she admitted that many women including herself had slept with this predator in order to get on festival bills. (#47, female expert musician and singer, 35-44)

Additionally, respondents reported bullying, experiencing a "boys' club" or "laddish" behaviour, and in some cases a veiled threat, or apprehension about challenging a man's behaviour in an Irish traditional music context. In two instances it appeared that respondents became an outlet for a man's frustration, suffering some form of punishment because they were a successful, skilled or talented woman.

Physical appearance and image

The responses show women's appearance and clothing is scrutinised, affecting their participation at all levels of Irish traditional music. Nineteen responses contained an instance of appearance being prioritised over musical ability: "After I had sang a song during a session, a male fiddler said that I was the hot blonde version of another female singer" (#1). This also affected women's access to work in traditional music, and was particularly evident in the context of Irish dance stage shows, where musicians for such shows were chosen on the basis of how they looked:

I suggested a list of three musicians, 2 of which were women and the promoter immediately asked if they were "pretty" or whether or not they were "overweight"—because he did not hire ugly or "overweight" musicians. (#62, male expert musician, 18-24)

Relationships and family life directly affecting participation

Respondents commented that family commitments disproportionately and directly affected women's participation in Irish traditional music. The effect of having children on participation was mentioned in seven responses. Some of these were in relation to working as a professional musician, but not all:

I suspected that my new domestic status with the inherent responsibilities led to me being ruled out for consideration. But I noticed that men in similar circumstances were still given opportunities. I could have fought more for these opportunities and made myself more visible by going out more, but by the time I managed to finish a long day at work, worry about a teenager and keep a home running, I just didn't have the energy to drag myself out to noisy bars late at night and play really fast music with a load of men who weren't interested in conversation with females and seemed to have no lack of energy and wanted to dominate the session. (#30, female experienced musician, 45-54)

Respondents reported that relationship status matters for women in Irish traditional music: "the woman in a band or duo *must* be 'the girlfriend'" (#89). Other examples included being consistently described in relation to their musician boyfriend rather than in their own right, or being accepted or welcomed into a group at first because of their relationship with a male musician. Relationships can also have a detrimental effect on participation:

I have also witnessed a very close female friend and talented musician be subjected to abuse and misogynistic behaviour by a powerful musician ex-boyfriend. He has used that power many times to stop other musicians engaging with her, to prevent her playing where she likes or prevent her playing with certain people (#29, female intermediate musician, 35-44).

B) Personal experiences of the effects of gender inequality

Five women reported a positive experience in Irish traditional music, and that they never felt discriminated against with respect to gender. However, four of those noted that women were under-represented in their experience, at festivals, concerts or sessions.

Emotional cost, mental load and vulnerability

Seventy-eight responses described extra emotional cost or effort as a result of gender in an Irish traditional music environment, whether a short-lived emotional response, a sustained emotional investment, an extra mental load, or disguising an emotional response to an incident (Hochschild 1979, 2012). All responses with this code were submitted by people who identified as women or who were gender non-conforming. This was the most common code, present in all contexts: in traditional music classes "I do think my young age at the time also made me easy to overpower but I think being a woman was a key factor in this" (#42); in administration "There was an awkward moment and he moved on" (#8); professionally "I was shocked and mortified" (#25); and at sessions "But when I really think properly about that incident, which I had almost erased from my mind, the overwhelming feeling I remember is humiliation. Humiliation and shame" (#9). Women musicians learned to avoid embarrassing men or bruising their ego. They reported a reluctance to speak out about a bad experience as they did not want to ruin the atmosphere or cause a scene, but also reported feeling guilty about conforming, or frustrated that they said nothing. Eleven responses reported a clear fear or vulnerability in an Irish traditional music context and eleven described shame or humiliation. Seven described a sacrifice—accepting gendered disadvantage to avoid upsetting the status quo, or to stay safe. Some responses detailed a realisation or coming to terms with the reality that gender is an issue in music, or women feeling despair or disappointment that they would always

be at a disadvantage participating because of their gender. Women respondents reported an erosion of confidence, that their experience of traditional music was tainted as a result of an incident, and that experiences affected their participation in Irish traditional music into the future.

Silencing

The responses contain many examples of the silencing of women, whether intentional or unconscious. Thirty-three responses contained evidence of women being ignored, their opinion disregarded, or being told “I know better” in traditional music contexts.

That night, I went home and I cried. I was so angry. The drunken idiot was one thing, but being ignored, laughed at, and mansplained to when I needed help was infuriating. Nobody else had to deal with him. No one else left early because of him. He was my problem. (#7, female experienced musician, 25-34)

Others reported deliberate attempts to erode self-esteem, to control, to belittle, or to police behaviour:

Eventually I confronted the manager on the tour bus and asked for money when we stopped for lunch. He took out a wad of cash, pulled out a few notes and then stuffed them into my bra—yes, my bra—in front of everyone. I was humiliated - humiliated and felt so degraded. He handed the cash over to the male musician with no fuss. This was 11 years ago and I still rage and well up when I think about it. I am such a strong and vocal person but put on the spot I froze and said nothing—completely disempowered which is exactly what he was trying to achieve. (#52, female expert musician, 25-34)

When I joined the band, their “manager” took me aside and told me that I wasn’t to get above myself (this was our first gig), and that they were a great band before ever a woman came along. To remember that. (#79, female expert musician and singer, 35-44)

Sometimes a man or men adjusted reality to fit their expectations of a woman’s status or behaviour, finding an alternative explanation to match assumptions:

Was asked by a reporter what it felt like being the token female musician in the band. The band name was my name, it was on a banner behind us on the stage, which the journalist could still see when interviewing me, I had been centre stage all night presenting the gig to the audience as well as being the lead musician, it was either my own compositions we played or my arrangement of trad tunes in the public domain and I had hired all other members of the band. But sure... token female! How the hell can I be the token female in my own band! (#18, female expert musician and singer, 35-44)

In seven of the responses, a woman was believed only when a man was alerted, or a man had corroborated her story. Furthermore, there were twelve instances in which an attempt to resolve an issue had no effect or was actively shut down. For example “I just think her protests were seen as awkward teenager” (#50) and “I emailed them very politely and respectfully to open the conversation and none of them have emailed me back about it” (#61).

Isolation

Isolation was a recurring theme, both to describe how women felt, but also as a self-imposed coping mechanism to escape difficult situations: “I left before they said anything else” (#13); “I took some deep breaths and decided I’d rather go home than try to fend off his attention anymore” (#7); “I got very disheartened and avoided sessions for a long time as a result” (#21). Women were cast as being a killjoy, as interrupting the norm, as being an other or outsider. There were specific mentions of being the only woman in a range of contexts, with resulting discomfort.

Learned behaviour and challenging established norms

The research demonstrated that after long term participation in a community it is difficult to depart from its norms, even for those who recognise the issues and no longer wish to comply with certain paradigms:

I have sat in silence for a multitude of experiences as I have felt conscious of my position as an intermediate musician and rattling the status quo, friendships and breaking the scene. (#91, female intermediate musician, 25-34)

The responses described ways in which women have deliberately enabled, allowed, normalised or condoned gender bias. Some respondents reported that they had a mostly positive experience in Irish traditional music, before going on to report an instance of bias. In exposing an instance of gender bias, some women respondents described relevant personal characteristics, or their breadth of experience. This is perhaps a way of validating their right to make such comments, having learned over time a need to justify or defend their music participation:

A sound engineer TOLD me I didn't need more fiddle in my monitor mix when I asked for it in a sound check. I had been gigging full-time for 6 years at this stage. He didn't tell the lads what they needed or didn't need. (#72, female expert musician and singer, 25-34)

Women downplayed the significance of an incident perhaps as a coping mechanism, or simply because it was so common. There were attempts to rationalise or explain the situation they were reporting:

My story is more a list of micro-stories rather than one event. And all could potentially include other factors than just gender, but they certainly don't happen to my male colleagues at the same rate that they happen to me. (Look at me qualifying it already.) (#37, female experienced musician and singer, 35-44)

Some internalised and normalised their experiences, then remembered or reassessed when prompted by a recollection. There were eleven instances of women showing frustration at their inaction at the time of the incident they report: "I said nothing". There were examples of feeling complicit in a system or status quo, and of feeling peer pressure not to speak up. Some respondents tentatively identified a problem, but failed to acknowledge the extent of the consequences because of their particular lived experience.

Responses to the research

In addition to responses to the research question, many participants included comments about the research itself, the FairPlé campaign, and general comments on discussing gender in relation to Irish traditional music. I include this information to provide insights into the context in which the research was carried out, the receptiveness of the community to this discussion, and the range and strength of responses it provoked. Some people completed the questionnaire specifically to record opposition, without giving an answer to the research question.

Several respondents expressed frustration with FairPlé—that it was not good enough, that they felt it focused on the professional aspect of Irish traditional music, or they were disappointed that existing female traditional musicians continued to work with someone they deemed sexist. However, there were many comments involving positive developments, or hope for change. These included reports of efforts towards gender equality, instances of male solidarity, the importance of role models, and comments that a concerted effort from all was necessary to make change. Sixteen responses expressed that the movement for gender equality in traditional music, this research, or the FairPlé campaign was positive and appreciated.

There were seven responses explicitly expressing opposition to the research, FairPlé or discussions regarding gender in Irish traditional music. Some respondents attempted to explain or excuse the differences in participation according to gender. Ten responses categorically stated that the author had not seen any form of gender discrimination, or that it does not happen. These included a suggestion that "the

gender issue is sometimes taken to extreme” (#34); incidents framed as the behaviour of individuals rather than a systematic problem; asserting that the problem is simply lazy untalented women complaining, that women should practice more, try harder, or be better.

I think your movement is absolutely laughable! Every well-known band has been fronted by a woman and indeed these bands have been the starting point of careers!... If women want to be acknowledged more as instrumentalists then practice more and stop throwing tantrums!! There is no gender problem in trad! At least there wasn't until you created one! (#17, expert musician and singer of undisclosed gender, 55-64)

Some members of FairPlé have made their money from being talented singers, and now, as they are not flavour of the month because of personal choice, they pull this sexism and oppression card. This is damaging to the tradition....I experience the same amount of disrespect as women do, I do not blame the whole Irish music culture and accuse it of sexism because of isolated incidents with some perhaps sexist people and choices I have made. (#46, experienced musician and singer of undisclosed gender, 18-24)

These same respondents were keen to separate “the music” from gender, and from the reality of the human experience:

What your (sic) talking about is a generation problem in Ireland! A way people think and talk! But that has nothing to do with music! Grow up and stop ruining what is supposed to be fun. (#17)

Good music is good music, it isn't about this ridiculous notion that life should be always 50/50. Yes, traditionally women did not record as much, or play the pipes as much, but this is more of a societal issue as opposed to being rooted in music. (#46)

Some responses were openly hostile, ridiculing the premise of this research, stating that I created a problem by carrying out the research “there was no issue until you created an imaginary one” (#99), or that the research and discussion was motivated by a desire to get more performance work. The popularity or success of specific women was used as evidence that gender does not affect participation or achievement in Irish traditional music. Gender disparity was framed simply as the outcome of choices women might make, or that gender discrimination is from an earlier period and does not happen now.

Discussion and implications

It is clear from respondents' experiences that gender affects participation across all contexts in Irish traditional music. Impacts are not confined to the professional sphere, nor are they confined to the past. While some of the submissions describe clearly abusive experiences, the majority represent subtle incidents that individually may be dismissed as being one person's behaviour, unrelated to gender, or a mistake. Collectively, the responses provide the first empirical data documenting the ways in which gender affects participation in Irish traditional music, and thus provide crucial evidence to a field in which gender has historically been overlooked. Those who contribute to gender inequality in Irish traditional music and those who experience it, struggle to see it happening, and there is not one simple cause or solution. This makes it difficult to identify, describe, or challenge factors contributing to gender inequality, and difficult to prove that it exists at all. The complexity of the issue is illustrated both in the nature and prevalence of the three most frequently assigned codes: women's extra emotional and mental load, societal sexism manifested in Irish traditional music, and these experiences being repeated or sustained over time. The findings highlight that this hidden, longstanding, unacknowledged complexity is wearing, and when considering the broader implications of this, respondents noted a decline in women's involvement with age, and lower numbers of women in professional traditional music contexts.

Some respondents used the prevalence of sexism in general society as a reason to oppose attempts to address it in Irish traditional music. They viewed its presence in

Irish traditional music as inevitable, and felt it was therefore inappropriate to interrogate questions of gender in that arena, or to find fault with the scene itself. However, it is clear from respondents' experiences that some of the systems of Irish traditional music allow gender bias to continue, and in some cases actively perpetuate it—from sessions and summer schools, to the ways in which traditional music is sold and promoted. In addition, a worrying tendency to protect the tradition from disruption was noted, a further illustration of the silencing of women participants described by respondents.

The findings highlight women's experiences of isolation in traditional music, and the consequences of this isolation warrant further consideration as it affects their development, their perception of themselves and their confidence. Women removing themselves from sessions and other musical environments affects their musical development in a way that it does not affect the equivalent male musician's development. The isolation is both physical and mental. When women remove themselves from such musical encounters for whole evenings, or whole lifetimes—they lose out on equivalent group playing time, networking, relationship-building, making personal and professional connections, cementing musical partnerships, rehearsing more, and playing more. These are significant factors in success and skill level generally, and career development in music for those who desire it.

Sessions are noted several times to be uncomfortable contexts. In terms of the implications of the findings it is important to consider and promote other ways of playing and participating in traditional music. Session mechanisms, culture and etiquette often highlight hierarchies, which are not always hierarchies of ability, but of certain types of power. Many festivals now have beginner, intermediate and advanced sessions. The findings suggest that further consideration must be given to acknowledging these different types of power hierarchies and considering the steps that can be taken to adjust certain contexts for traditional music.

It is important to have an awareness of which groups these structures serve or exclude, as these effects are not confined to questions of gender. The demographic information of the current sample shows little gender or racial diversity. The research is therefore limited in that it overwhelmingly describes the experiences of people who identify as white men and women, and contributes nothing to our understanding of intersectionality in this context. More work is required to reach and hear about the experiences of minority groups.

When considering the implications of the findings, although the complexity of this issue makes it difficult to define and address, it does also mean that everyone is in a position to help bring about change. Many roles and stakeholders arise in these testimonies, including but not limited to: teachers, camera operators, session leaders, production companies, instrument makers, promoters, well-known musicians, managers, musical families, booking agents, the media, bar owners, band members, and sound engineers. Nineteen responses mentioned existing traditional music organisations who hold power in this area. Several respondents stated the need for men to take action, and to work together with women to effect change, including to overcome instances where "men do not act for fear of other men" (#119).

Those who have the greatest effect of all are peer musicians and listeners—those who listen and play alongside the survey respondents. It is only when these stories are viewed collectively can we begin to understand how they intersect with culture, society, race, politics, class, gender, specific events, general experience over time, sessions, history and performance. It is only then that we can begin to take steps towards making Irish traditional and folk music a more welcoming place for everyone, with better equality of opportunity.

Notes

¹ The questionnaire was designed according to best practice outlined in Sommer & Sommer (2002). Categories on ethnicity were taken from the UK Government Statistical Service standards with special relevance to Northern Ireland (Office for National Statistics, 2015).

² The recordings were presented at listening stations at the Symposium on Women and Traditional | Folk Music at NUI Galway, 9 February 2019; Women's Work Festival, Belfast, 8 June 2019; and Féile an Phobal at Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Belfast, 2 August 2019. Excerpts were also featured on BBC Radio 3's Music Matters programme, in a segment about this research, on 8 June 2019.

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