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Moore, L., & Scraton, P. (2010). 'From Conflict to Peace?' The Rights Abuses of Women and Girls in Prison in Northern Ireland'. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 22(2), 269-286.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
Current Issues in Criminal Justice

**Publication Status:**  
Published (in print/issue): 01/11/2010

**Document Version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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# *From Conflict to Peace? The Rights Abuses of Women and Girls in Prison in Northern Ireland*

Linda Moore and Phil Scraton\*

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## *Abstract*

This article is based on primary research conducted by the authors in Northern Ireland in the Mourne House women's unit at Maghaberry Prison in 2004 and in Ash House women's prison unit in Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre from 2005-2006. It explores the imprisonment of women in prison in the context of a society slowly and unevenly emerging from violent conflict and against a backdrop of the global rise of women's imprisonment over the past two decades. The history of the gendered punishment of politically motivated prisoners is explored, followed by discussion of the findings of primary research in Mourne House women's unit, and after its closure, in Ash House. The conclusion analyses how women's prison experiences in the North contribute to an understanding of the contested terrain of agency and resistance. Finally, the article explores the potential for, and barriers, to change within women's imprisonment in Northern Ireland.

## **Introduction**

Between 1966 and 2003, 3,703 people died and over 40,000 were seriously injured as a direct consequence of the Conflict in Northern Ireland (McGrattan and Edwards 2010:xviii). Most were killed by republican or loyalist paramilitary violence and 11 per cent by state forces (Fitzduff and O'Hagan 2009). Regarding some civilian deaths, allegations of state collusion with loyalist paramilitaries have persisted. Fitzduff and O'Hagan (2009) conclude that in the context of the small population of Northern Ireland, at that time 1.5 million, 'the number of people closely associated to those who were killed or injured is about half the population'. While paramilitary ceasefires and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) were significant in moving towards peace, Conflict-related deaths have persisted, demonstrating that 'while the troubles have subsided they have not fully ended' (McKittrick et al 2004:1544).

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The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement included reviews of policing (*Patten Commission*) and of the criminal justice system (*Criminal Justice Review*) alongside the appointment of oversight bodies for policing, criminal justice, equality and human rights. Within the Agreement, early release was agreed for politically motivated prisoners aligned with republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations on ceasefire. Yet, as this article illustrates, the failure to address institutionalised, egregious breaches of prisoners' rights allowed oppressive, security-driven penal regimes to continue. The multi-party Hillsborough Agreement (2010), which established devolution of criminal justice and policing to the Northern Ireland Assembly, recognised the need to review the prison system including 'consideration of a women's prison which is fit for purpose and meets international obligations and best practice' (Hillsborough Agreement 2010:para 7). In June 2010 an independent prison review team was appointed.

The marginalisation of women's imprisonment has been well documented and its inclusion within the Hillsborough Agreement is significant and overdue. In the 1980s concern about the conditions endured by women prisoners in the North gave rise to local and international campaigns against strip searching republican women in Armagh jail. More recently public, political and media attention focused on the publication of two research reports published and endorsed by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (Scruton and Moore 2005, 2007).

The first report documents the experiences of women prisoners in Mourne House, a female unit that replaced Armagh and located within the male high-security Maghaberry Prison. The Human Rights Commission initiated the research following the death of 19 year old Annie Kelly, found hanging in an isolation cell in Mourne in September 2002 and the publication of a highly critical report by the Prisons Inspectorate. Human rights commissioners visited the unit in 2003. Working on behalf of the Commission over three months in 2004, the authors closely observed the regime in Mourne House. They interviewed the majority of women prisoners incarcerated during that period, prison guards and managers, professionals, volunteers and representatives of the Prison Officers' Association.

Mourne was closed in June 2004 and women prisoners were transferred to Ash House, a unit within Hydebank Wood, a male Young Offender Centre. It remains the sole custodial unit for women prisoners in Northern Ireland. Research in Ash House was conducted by the authors from December 2005 through to March 2006, including observation of the regime, interviews with 34 women prisoners and with prison guards, managers and others working in the prison. A second report was produced from this research (Scruton and Moore 2007).

This article explores the imprisonment of women in Northern Ireland, in the contexts of a society slowly and unevenly emerging from violent conflict and the global rise of women's imprisonment. Consideration is given to how women prisoners in the North have experienced the gendered punishment (Carlen 2002) common to all women in prison and how punishment has been shaped within a penal system dominated by concerns about the management of politically motivated prisoners.

Women in prison in the North comprise only a small proportion of the total prison population – 2.8 per cent (International Centre for Prison Studies 2010). On 20 September 2010, there were 41 women in prison in Northern Ireland, 17 of who were on remand (Northern Ireland Prison Service 2010b). The ratio of women to men is considerably lower than in England and Wales where women constitute five per cent of the total prison

population (International Centre for Prison Studies 2010). While the number of women in prison is relatively low, the global trend of rising female imprisonment has become evident. In 2000, at the time of the Criminal Justice Review, the average number of women in prison was 20. By 2009-10 it had risen to 45, the highest number being 57 (Northern Ireland Prison Service 2010a:33-35). During 2009/10 approximately half were on remand. During that year 143 women were imprisoned for fine default (including fines for not paying for a television licence) and nine were immigration detainees. The number of immigration detainees is artificially low as most are transferred to detention centres in Scotland and England. The imprisonment of women on short sentences is a feature of the Northern Ireland prison system. Of the 28 sentenced women imprisoned during 2009-10, only four were sentenced to more than two years in custody. 'Violence against the person' was the most common offence for sentenced women (16 women), followed by acquisitive and property offences (7 women) and smaller numbers sentenced for drug and motoring offences.

Julia Sudbury (2005:xii) writes, 'by describing the lockdown as 'global', I do not suggest the existence of a universal and undifferentiated global carceral regime'. In other words, while the experiences of women in prison in Northern Ireland are consistent with those of women prisoners elsewhere, they also reflect the particular circumstances of a prison system within a society in transition from conflict. Current regimes and operational practices are derived in the recent context of managing politically motivated prisoners in the North's prisons, including the gendered punishment of politically motivated women. The following analysis provides the backdrop to the primary research into breaches of women prisoners' rights in Mourne House in 2004 and Ash House from 2004 to 2006. The article concludes with a discussion of the breaches of women prisoners' rights in Northern Ireland and considers the barriers to change, including a penal culture moulded in an atmosphere of violence and conflict. Issues of agency and resistance are explored, contrasting the collective agency of prisoners remanded or convicted of politically motivated offences with the isolation experienced by individual women prisoners imprisoned for non-political offences.

## **Gendered Punishment and Resistance in the Context of Political Imprisonment in Northern Ireland**

McEvoy (1998) characterises the North's prison system during the most violent years of conflict as unique. Over half of those incarcerated were for politically motivated offences including high levels of long-term and life imprisonment. The term politically motivated refers in this context to conflict-related activities, including violence, carried out by loyalist or republican paramilitary group members with a political motive but deemed terrorist by the State. McEvoy identifies three discrete strategies employed by the State to manage politically motivated prisoners: 'reactive containment', 'criminalisation' and 'managerialism'. These strategies were resisted by prisoners through a variety of methods including self-organisation and refusal to conform to prison regimes; for example, refusal to wear prison clothes or do prison work, hunger strikes and escape. Violence was also used by paramilitary groups inside and outside the prisons. Twenty-nine prison officers were killed during the Conflict and many more were forced to leave their homes as a result of intimidation. An estimated 50 guards took their own lives (Ryder 2000:192).

From the 1970s, the state's strategy of 'reactive containment' included internment without trial and the granting of special category status for prisoners remanded or sentenced

for conflict-related offences. During this phase the State tolerated political prisoners effectively running their 'compounds' through a highly organised and disciplined structure. Self-education was crucial to prisoner resistance. In 1976 non-jury courts were introduced to deal with offences scheduled under emergency legislation, and special category status was removed. These policy changes were essential components of the State's strategy of criminalisation. Under this strategy prisoners were classified as ordinary criminals and required to wear prison uniform and participate in prison work. Many politically affiliated prisoners refused to cooperate with these requirements. Denied access to their own clothes, they remained naked, wrapped only in prison blankets. During 1978, the prisoners refused to leave their cells, alleging violence by guards. They adopted a 'dirt protest', smearing excrement on the walls of their cells. The State's response was to subject prisoners to 'harsh beatings, scaldings and humiliations' at the hands of prison guards (McEvoy 2006:144). In 1981, ten Republican prisoners died on a hunger strike as part of the campaign for political status. In April 1981, Republican prisoner Bobby Sands was elected to the UK Parliament as member for Fermanagh/South Tyrone. Soon after, following 66 days on hunger strike, he died. Over 100,000 people attended his funeral demonstrating that support for prisoners' resistance went far beyond the prison walls (O'Hearn 2006).

Mary Corcoran (2006:xvii) observes that analysis of the 'gendered organisation of punishment' is absent in most academic accounts of the period. The State's policy of criminalisation had a profound impact on politically motivated women in Armagh jail, where all female prisoners (detained for ordinary and political offences) were held until its closure in 1986. Like their male comrades, republican women in Armagh, many of them teenagers, resisted being labelled as criminal through 'blanket' and 'dirt' protests, and hunger strikes, refusing to wear prison uniforms or conform to the regime. In response to their protest, the authorities punished the women by 23 hours a day cellular lockdown, refusing access to 'privileges', including the use of toilets. The official explanation was that 'a number of women had been confined to their cells and deprived of toilet facilities except for their slop-pots' (*Northern Ireland Office Press Release, 7 February 1980*, in Corcoran, 2006: 37). Republican women stated they had been impelled into the dirt protest. With insufficient access to sanitation, and chamber pots overflowing, they had little alternative but to smear faeces and menstrual blood on their cell walls. In a contemporaneous account, Nell McCafferty (1981:9-10) describes the situation:

... upwards of thirty Republican women were using their prison cells as toilets, each constructing from their own bodily waste a silent smelly cave. The women did not wash their bodies since that date, or brush their teeth or clean their hair. They were locked in for twenty-three hours of every day, deprived even of daylight, because the windows and spy holes were boarded up to prevent them emptying their chamber pots. They were not allowed television, radio or reading material. They changed their clothes once every three months, wearing for ninety days at a time the same jeans, sweaters and underwear.

Liz Lagrue, imprisoned for protesting against conditions in Armagh, described the pressures of living through the dirt protest:

The vomit and diarrhoea and used sanitary towels we leave in the pot and empty it out passageways when we are released for meals. If the smell is overpowering you can use the sanitary towels as a mask around your mouth, but you try to be sparing of that because the number of sanitary towels per month is restricted. They know we wear them even when not menstruating to provide some protection against our knickers or jeans and avoid disease, but even so they restrict us to two packages a month. That's the kind of thing that freaks you out about them and about the doctor. (Cited in McCafferty 1981:13)

As Lagrua notes, menstruation provided an opportunity for the authorities to further regulate and control women: 'if a girl had her period on say the third of a month, then she got her sanitary towels on the third of the following month, even though her period might have arrived earlier' (Coogan 1980:115). Like their male comrades, women faced physical abuse from male and female guards:

One of the female officers started nipping my leg while the male officer was twisting my arm very slowly to turn my head and face the authorities. (Anne Marie Quinn, cited in McCafferty 1981:27)

I was taken from my cell by two female officers and once on the wing was pulled around to be forcibly searched. Before I knew what was happening I was attacked by several male officers and thrown to the ground. While I was on the ground I was continually punched and kicked all over my body but particularly on my face ... After more kicking I passed out and when I came round I was being thrown into a punishment cell. (Lynn O'Connell, cited in McCafferty 1981:28)

Corcoran (2006:179) argues that the women's no wash protest was construed by the media as particularly abhorrent given the ideological construction of female cleanliness. Whereas the 'Blanket men' were portrayed as demonstrating 'endurance', the women's no-wash protest was condemned as having 'transgressed codes of feminine propriety'. Liz Lagrua argues that the State used the construction of political women as dirty as justification for refusing adequate and necessary sanitary protection: 'Criminalisation and sanitary towels go together. Criminal means clean. Political means dirty, they try to tell us' (Liz Lagrua, women's activist and former prisoner, in McCafferty 1981:13). Fairweather et al (1984:222) argue that by leaving women to 'sit in their own menstrual blood amidst excreta and urine', the authorities tried to 'break the prisoners in an exclusively female way'. Theresa O'Keefe (2006:535) considers menstrual blood as both an 'instrument of war' and a 'weapon of resistance'. In limiting women's access to sanitation the authorities created conditions in which infectious diseases flourished. Yet, having all other means of resistance removed, women prisoners fought back, their blood smeared on cell walls providing a powerful symbol of their refusal to be defeated by the regime.

Following the 1981 hunger strike, with ten men dead and widespread community unrest, the State adopted a more pragmatic approach which involved management rather than defeat of the prisoners (McEvoy 2001). In Armagh, however, gendered punishment continued and from 1982 there was a significant increase in cell searches and strip searching. All women prisoners, regardless of age, pregnancy or menstruation, were routinely and regularly strip searched. Those refusing to cooperate were forcibly stripped by guards, a practice that brought local, national and international condemnation. It 'came to epitomise, for many, the resolve of the security services to have women submit to the process of criminalisation and surveillance by taking control of women's nakedness' (Pickering 2002:181). As a woman prisoner stated, 'They are always attacking your sexuality in order to degrade you, to humiliate you and in order to beat you' (Pickering 2002:177). Faced with degradation and violence, women initiated strategies to reclaim control: 'I would try to embarrass them with my nakedness. And they hated it. They hated it because we made them feel more uncomfortable with what they did' (Kathleen, cited in Corcoran 2006:165).

Following the closure of Armagh in 1986, female prisoners were moved to Mourne House, the women's prison unit in the newly built high-security Maghaberry prison complex. Male prisoners arrived the following year. Mourne House held politically motivated and ordinary prisoners. There were cells for 59 women in four wings. Official

claims that it operated a normal, integrated regime were contradicted in March 1992 by a mass strip search of female republican prisoners. It began at 10.30am and lasted until 9pm pausing only for guards' lunch and dinner breaks (Aretxaga 2001). Male and female guards in riot gear and carrying shields, some accompanied by dogs, entered cells. Women resisted physically, some barricading cell doors. Begoña Aretxaga's account, from hand-written narratives and interviews, reveals the distress:

Around 10:00 am I heard that they were going to strip all of us. I couldn't believe it because we had jail searches before but they never involved us being stripped. Then I saw the search team coming in with full riot gear and I heard one of the men screws singing 'happy days are here again'. (Bernie, cited in Aretxaga 2001:9)

They came into my cell and threw me to the floor, they held me between four screws and two others removed my clothes forcefully. I was taking my period. They took the sanitary towel and threw it to a corner as if I was shit! They had the door open and the male screws were outside, I don't know how much they could see. They were coaxing the female screws and could hear everything. (Carol, cited in Aretxaga 2001:13)

Karen Quinn describes listening to the 'screams of pain' coming from other women as they resisted the searches. She sat crying in her cell until it was 'her turn' (cited in Calamati 2002:87). Confronted by female guards she refused to undress but 'there wasn't much I could do to hold off those four women in riot gear when they set on me and pinned me down'. Thrown to the floor, she was forcibly stripped:

When they tried to pull my sweater off, it got stuck over my head and I couldn't breathe. Instinctively I raised my chin. Again they slammed my face onto the floor and one of the warders kept it pressed down with her knee. My arms were twisted so far back that I thought they'd break. I yelled that I was having my period but that didn't stop them ... They grabbed me by the hips and managed to get the trousers down below my waist and then they yanked them down over my ankles ... I couldn't breathe for the pain ... they managed to strip me naked. As I lay there on the ground they threw me a blanket and a sanitary napkin. The warder who held me down with her knee wasn't finished ... as she was leaving, she landed me a violent kick in the ribs. (Cited in Calamati:87-88)

Regarding resistance, McEvoy (2001:31) notes the 'important differences between prisoners who do what they can to *get by* during their incarceration and those who *resist*'. The history of political imprisonment and internment in the North is that of institutionalised punishment by the authorities and collective resistance by prisoners. Despite the women's collective strength, as Aretxaga (2001:16) notes the personal costs of resistance were high.

Jennifer, the leader of women prisoners in 1989, told me that physical resistance was taking an enormous psychological toll on the prisoners; it gave them a sense of agency but at a great cost. Not only was it deeply distressing to be forcibly undressed and injured in the process, but prisoners were punished afterwards for disobedience with loss of remission and solitary confinement.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement resulted in the early release of those politically motivated prisoners aligned with organisations on ceasefire. The Agreement also established a Criminal Justice Review (CJR) comprising civil servants and independent experts to review the criminal justice system. It was wrongly assumed by the Review and by other commentators, that following the release of political prisoners a prison system in Northern Ireland would emerge consistent with other UK jurisdictions and compliant with international human rights standards. Acknowledging that a 'comprehensive review of correctional policy' would have been too 'enormous' an undertaking, the CJR report (CJR

2000:paras 12.1 and 12.2) noted that the Prison and Probation Services had experienced 'very great difficulties' in operating 'within a divided society at a time of civil strife.' The 'inevitable' consequence was that the Prison Service had focused on the 'challenge of controlling large numbers of paramilitary prisoners' with a 'profound effect not only within prison but also on the lives of prison staff and their families outside'. The Peace Process and early release of prisoners had placed the Prison Service in 'the throes of major change', facing radical shrinkage as a result of staff reductions (CJR 2000:12.31). Those consulted emphasised the issues facing women prisoners. At the time approximately 20 women were incarcerated in the Mourne House unit. The CJR report noted the difficulties for the Prison Service in taking 'specific measures' to manage a regime for a small number of women without extending 'equivalent treatment to a very much larger class of male prisoners whose needs may be very different'. While there were 'no easy solutions', it recommended that male and female prisoners could share some facilities and programs. It was anticipated that parallel changes in the youth justice system would 'obviate the need to hold juveniles [girl children]' with adult women in Mourne House. Overall, the situation for women prisoners should be 'kept under review' (CJR 2000:12.78).

The failure of the Criminal Justice Review to recognise the profound impact of the Conflict on women prisoners and to make appropriate recommendations has had lasting consequences which became all too apparent during the primary research.

## **Women in Mourne House, Maghaberry Prison**

Research for this article began in Mourne House during 2004 and continued in Hydebank Wood through to 2006. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission raised profound concerns about the right to life (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3) and right to freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment (UDHR, Article 5). The Prison Inspectorate's report (HMCIP 2003) noted the 'potential dangers' inherent in 'situations where the needs of a small group of women ... can become marginalised' (HMCIP 2003:para MH.17). Given the distinct needs and contexts of women's imprisonment, it called for 'safeguards, such as *total* separation, *distinct* management and staffing teams, and *separate* healthcare facilities' [emphases added]. Inspectors noted inappropriately high levels of staffing, unchanged since the unit held high numbers of paramilitary prisoners (HMCIP 2003:para MH.04). Eighty-seven prison guards were responsible for an average of 25 women prisoners (HMCIP 2003:para MH.14). The women's healthcare centre had been closed and women attended the male prison hospital. Inspectors expressed concern about the high ratio of male to female staff, routine strip searching of women without adequate reason, the use of isolation cells for self-harming and suicidal women and complacency over recording-keeping regarding women at risk.

The authors' in-depth qualitative and observational research documented a regime in continuing decline. The Prison Service offered no strategic plan or operational policies to address the particular needs of women and girls, no governor dedicated to the management of women in prison and no gender-specific training for staff. Eighty per cent of guards were men and night guard duty was often all male. Women interviewed included life, medium-term and short-term prisoners, remands, committals, an immigration detainee, two republican prisoners and 'young offenders', including girls under 18 (remand and sentenced). One third of all admissions were for non-payment of fines and the majority of sentenced prisoners had tariffs less than three months, raising questions about the

appropriateness of prison for women whose offending behaviour was minimal. One day into fieldwork, 34 year old Roseanne Irvine, was found hanging in her cell. Having recently returned from the Punishment Block and fearing loss of access to her young daughter, Roseanne took drugs given to her by another prisoner. She was examined by a nurse and declared fit to remain in her cell. Interviewed in the immediate aftermath of Roseanne's death, a woman prisoner stated that guards 'did not check on the women every hour and [Roseanne] said to me that one of these nights they will find someone hanging and they will be dead':

If the staff had checked on Roseanne more often that night she might be alive today. They knew she was down ... The girl needed help which she did not get. She was so down. This place is like hell on earth.

Roseanne's closest friend on the landing was devastated and was transferred to the male prison hospital. She commented:

The way that girl was treated the system let her down. There should be a hospital for women. It is disgusting, dirty in here ... I always told her not to do anything to herself. I tried to see her that night but we only got 20 minutes out [of the cells]. I started to write things down myself. I wrote there should be more support for women with mental health problems.

Guards, managers and healthcare staff were aware that Roseanne was a serious suicide risk. She was a woman with complex social and mental health needs, a history of self-harm and suicide attempts. The week before her death she appeared in court wearing pyjamas. She had laceration marks on her face and body from self harm. At her 2007 inquest the jury concluded: 'The prison system failed Roseanne'. The 'defects' that contributed to her death included 'severe lack of communication and inadequate recording' and 'lack of healthcare and resources for women prisoners' (Belfast Coroner's Court, 13 February 2007).

Interviews and observation revealed a regime that neglected the identified needs of women and girl prisoners, lacked creative or constructive programs, compromised women's physical and mental health and failed to meet minimum standards of a duty of care. There was little or no support on reception and no structured induction program. Strip-searched on arrival, women were locked immediately in the isolation of their cells. They were regularly locked down for 17 hours a day and workshops were permanently closed. The high level of unnecessary security created problems for the routine operation of the unit. Despite an impressive range of education classes on the timetable, they were frequently cancelled, often at the last minute. The only organised activity was horticulture, offered exclusively to sentenced women. For many women the regime consisted solely of being locked isolation in cells:

The monotony is crucifying. Before I came in here I had such a busy lifestyle. I went from one end of the scale when I didn't have time to see the news at night to suddenly having hours and hours on my hands. That's what hit me when I first came in. I couldn't get used to that. I kept looking at my watch, thinking, what am I going to do with my time? (Long-term prisoner)

Guards' interaction with women was minimal, rarely friendly and often hostile. A long-termer commented:

The majority simply don't care. They do their job as a means to an end. There's a minority who drive home the fact that you are prisoners, you're the scum of the earth, you're not deemed fit to mix with society.

A woman prisoner recalled an incident regarding guards' responses to two Romanian prisoners imprisoned along with their baby daughter:

They found it hard enough with the language barrier because their English wasn't that great. The screws had a pretty nasty attitude to them, not the ones on during the day, mainly at night. I was sitting in the cell one night last week or the week before and the wee [baby] was very, very sick. I could hear her vomiting from my cell – she's directly across. They did tell her to fuck off and everything when she asked to see the doctor. That there shouldn't be allowed. OK, fair enough, they've done what they've done, but they don't need to be treated like animals, because they're human beings.

Women prisoners were unequivocal in explaining guards' hostility:

The only form of power in their lives is when they don the uniform and come in here.

They feel threatened by you. It's outrageous that they feel jealous. What of? The fact that you've been handed down a life sentence?

Healthcare for women prisoners was dire. In attending the male prison hospital, transport and security had to be arranged and on arrival they were accommodated in cells alongside male prisoners: 'It is very dirty and the men talk very dirty. It really upset me' (committal prisoner). Mental health care, particularly on the residential landings, was inadequate and guards received no appropriate training. Healthcare plans written by prison doctors were routinely ignored on the landings, including plans for women classified at risk of self-harm and suicide. A long term prisoner recalled the admission to prison of a young woman who had a heroin addiction. She had been 'left to lie in her cell and had the sweats and couldn't eat ... just left to deal with it herself'. A remand prisoner commented:

Mourne House simply houses prisoners. Place the prisoner in her cell with a TV and feed until release. TVs are cheaper than allocating more staff to organise constructive activities, but they become a 24-hour substitute.

The default response to self-harming and suicidal women was to accommodate them in the punishment block isolation cells for their 'own safety':

I've never self-harmed myself but I know a lot of girls who have. They're just trying to find someone to talk to, to give them help. They need a counsellor. Young people cutting themselves. To me that's a cry for help. But instead of having someone to talk to, they're just thrown in the punishment unit. It's not on... They're just left in there. (Long-term prisoner)

One incident was witnessed by several women:

The week before last a senior officer on night guard ... this woman had twice that day tried to hang herself. One of the other officers said, 'Could you leave the keys? I'm not content just looking through the flap, she could have a ligature around her neck.' 'No, don't be looking in at her. Don't even look at her. Fuck her'. That's the way it was going but it was top volume. 'Fuck the old bitch, let her go...'

At the outset of the research, a nun raised the case of a 17 year old young woman held on the 'secure observation landing', otherwise known as 'the punishment block'. Her 'standard' regime consisted of 23 hours locked in her cell. She sat on the 'bed' (a raised concrete plinth, no mattress, built into the floor), dressed in a non-destructible, short-sleeved gown that had Velcro fastenings down the front. The child had extensive wounds to both legs and arms, consistent with cuts by a sharp implement and scouring using velcro fastenings. She felt compelled to self-harm: 'It's how I cope'. She continued:

I was in a hospital out there [in the community] and I still harmed myself then. I'm not getting the right treatment. I shouldn't be down here. There's nothing to do. It's worse in the night. I hear voices and see things. But no-one helps me. I should be in the hospital wing. This place needs a women's hospital or a special wing for nurses to control and deal with women with problems.

Part of her care plan was 'optimal contact' with staff and other prisoners, yet she was held in isolation and guards' checks were confined to 'looking into the cell' through a spy hole. Deeply concerned about what was witnessed, the authors contacted her lawyer and gave evidence at a judicial review of her isolation. The court ordered her immediate removal from the isolation cell to the prison hospital. Within weeks of release to the community, she was rearrested, returned to Mourne House and to the punishment cell. The authors interviewed her lying on the raised plinth in the foetal position, dressed in a non-destructible gown from which the Velcro had been removed. She was not permitted underwear and during menstruation had to keep a sanitary towel wedged between her legs. There was a plastic potty for a toilet and no sink or bowl to wash her hands or body. She commented, 'They're not doing anything for me... I want out of here. The hospital's the right place for me. Nursing staff talk to you'.

During fieldwork, two republican women prisoners were held on remand. Unlike male politically affiliated prisoners, the republican women were refused separation from ordinary prisoners. Security was intense:

I was put out on a visit yesterday and there were six staff on the visit for one person. I'm not that high a security risk.

Their [guards] attitude towards certain people and their prejudices ... its eye contact and dirty looks. But they are able to get away with it.

As part of their campaign for parity with their male comrades, the women stayed in their cells, refusing association with ordinary prisoners. One of the republican women went on hunger strike for separation and contacted the researchers. The authors met the security Governor who stated that a decision had been taken to grant separation but that this would not be communicated to the woman until she ended her protest, as the Prison Service could not be perceived as acquiescing with the demands of a hunger striker. The authors asked what would be the consequences of her remaining on hunger strike. The Governor's reply was as chilling as it was unequivocal: 'She'll die'. Following negotiations the republican women were provided with a separate landing, formerly housing 'young offenders'. This was achieved, however, by placing children and young women on the normal adult landing.

## **Women Prisoners in Ash House**

In late June 2004, women prisoners were transferred to Ash House, a unit in Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre, in controversial and contested circumstances. The Human Rights Commission opposed the transfer, considering it inappropriate to locate a women's unit within a male young offender centre. It sought access to investigate conditions in Ash House but initially was refused. Five months later, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland (CJINI) and the Prisons Inspectorate conducted an unannounced inspection of Ash House. The inspection report concurred with the Commission's view that Ash House was unsuitable for the imprisonment of women and girls (HMCIP/CJINI 2004).

In November 2004, Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights for the Council of Europe, also visited Hydebank Wood. In his subsequent report, Gil-Robles (2005:para 126) emphasised mental health problems faced by women and young people and concluded there was 'no possibility for the women to receive appropriate treatment, indeed, the conditions could only be considered likely to aggravate their fragile condition still further'. He identified two specific problems: the lack of appropriate psychological care available within the prison and the precarious mental health condition of some women suggesting that they should not be in prison (Gil-Robles 2005:para 126). He concluded, the 'continuing detention of seriously disturbed women in ordinary prisons without adequate psychiatric care clearly breaches Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) prohibiting inhumane and degrading treatment' (Gil-Robles 2005:para 129). In its observations on the UK Government report, the Committee on the Prevention of Torture (CAT 2004:para C.4.g) described 'unacceptable conditions' for women in Hydebank Wood including: 'a lack of gender-sensitive facilities, policies, guarding and medical aid, with male guards alleged to constitute 80 per cent of guarding staff and incidents of inappropriate threats and incidents affecting female detainees'.

Eventually, access was granted to the authors for follow-up research in Hydebank Wood and fieldwork began in December 2005, continuing until March 2006. Interviews were conducted with women prisoners, prison officers and professionals, including representatives of non-governmental organisations working in the prison, healthcare staff, clergy, the Chair of the Independent Monitoring Board and representatives of the Prison Officers' Association. Issues raised by women included the impact and consequences of no in-cell sanitation and problems of toilet and wash access at night; frequency and conduct of strip searches; regular verbal abuse from young male prisoners within the grounds and particularly at night; over-use of punishment cells for distressed, depressed and suicidal women; sharing visiting times and location with young male prisoners; sharing healthcare, particularly the holding of women and young male prisoners in adjacent cells in the healthcare centre; and the imposition of a highly regulated and restricted regime under which women prisoners were treated like young offenders by staff.

Two women prisoners who had been transferred from Mourne House stated that during periods of lock-down, toilet access was controlled by an electronic unlock system:

We do have an emergency button. One night I was dying to go to the toilet for one hour and then pushed the emergency button. I was put on report and they told me never to push again unless I was dying. I haven't used the pot since I was out of nappies and I'm sure not going to use one now.

One night I waited for over an hour. I hit the emergency buzzer and two officers came flying down. I said 'Thank Goodness, I'm dying to go to the toilet'. They said, 'Don't push the emergency button unless you're dying'. And you get some officers who tell you to 'Fuck off' and use your potty.

All women prisoners reported the degradation endured through routine and frequent strip searches:

When you're on your menstrual cycle you still have to strip. It's very degrading. You have to show them the pants and pad with the blood on it. It's disgusting, you're embarrassed. Their attitude is indifferent. It's their job but it's not a nice thing to do. (Sentenced prisoner)

In reception I had to strip and be naked for search. I had to be naked in front of two ladies. They searched me and then said 'Get naked'. (Immigration detainee)

No woman was exempt from the strip search process, including pregnant women and child prisoners. An older woman Irish Traveller, imprisoned for non-payment of a fine, cried continually about the shame and humiliation of the strip search.

Shared transport with young male prisoners often resulted in verbal abuse:

They shouted ‘smelly pussy’, ‘suck my cock’, ‘what do you do for relief?’ When we got to court I said to the court guy, ‘That was disgraceful’. They say they don’t know who it was so they didn’t know who to charge. Any strength I had for the court was gone at that stage. You’re dreading the bus journey as much as court. (Remand prisoner)

It was evident from several weeks’ observation on the landings that the majority of women had little to occupy their time. The most disturbing example of this was on the A1 landing, which accommodated those ‘assessed’ as most vulnerable or at risk. Rarely more than a few women were held on A1, passing out-of-cell time in a bleak, poorly furnished recreation room. Mostly silent, they sat on hard chairs, in silence. Occasionally they watched television or had brief conversations with guards. There was no structured program of therapeutic activity. Boredom and monotony was replicated on the A3 landing, the committals landing. Women in prison for a few days for fine default sat, seemingly lost, in the company of others who had been on the landing for a while. The dominant atmosphere was that of resignation to time wasted. It constituted a malaise cutting across all landings:

The worst thing in here is the monotony, there’s very little for us to do. Education is rarely available to us and at that it’s very basic. It’s hard to cope especially when you were used to a busy life, for it to become the opposite and you end up doing nothing all day long. (Long term)

You’re just being fed, lying down, locked up and that’s it. I did self-assertiveness and anger management at the women’s drop-in. There should be more opportunities here. (Short term)

Women separated from their children experienced particular pain:

I’m a mother and I can’t get to see my children because they live too far away. It wouldn’t be fair on them but it drives you mad sometimes when you’re in your cell so much and all you do is think and think.

Senior managers were adamant that the ‘old days’ of Mourne, when guards were detached and rarely spoke to prisoners, had ended and it was expected that guards would interact positively with prisoners during association time. With few exceptions, these expectations were not met. Women prisoners agreed that their daily experiences—‘a bad day or an alright day’—depended significantly on which officers were on duty:

Some very little [number of] staff will come and ask how you are. Ninety-five per cent won’t. (Focus group)

Well there’s some staff just look at you, really treat you like a prisoner, you know ... Some of them would just look down their noses at you as if you’re a bit of dirt. Like one of the prison officers turned around and said [to another prisoner] ‘I’ve cleaned better off my shoe’. (Sentenced prisoner)

A long term gave an example of how rules were used to suit guards’ immediate needs or moods:

Your confidence is broke all the time. Like you know when you get up in the morning some of the girls will say to you, ‘Who’s on?’ And when you tell them it’s, ‘Oh no’. Because you know that you can’t talk to them or they’re going to shout at you for the slightest wee thing.

A senior manager criticised the negative staff culture:

You get good and bad [guards]. I can't change the outlook of the staff and you do need an outlook change of staff and you get that through their managers. Here it's not about training but there's no turnover, no change. So I would look at about 50 per cent of the staff moving. They're turnkeys some of them and we don't always give encouragement to good staff.

For routine support, women relied primarily on chaplains, some professionals and staff from non-governmental organisations who worked in the prison.

Day-to-day medical provision for women remained deficient. Healthcare professionals considered that appropriate healthcare provision could be delivered only in a discrete women's facility with fully trained, designated staff permanently on-call. It was not possible for the healthcare centre to function autonomously because prison regulations and agreements with the Prison Officers' Association had set boundaries to working practices. It was clear that the agreements were constraining on the appointment of female staff to provide psychiatric cover for women and the head of healthcare stated that provision fell short of community provision. Inter-agency meetings were held to assess women deemed at risk. Given limited facilities and staffing, however, the outcome was to lock self-harming women in isolation cells, dressed in 'anti-suicide clothing' and observed through in-cell CCTV.

I tried to strangle myself and they brought me to the 1s [A1: 'Special Support Unit and Segregation Unit']. I tried to strangle myself – I still get days like that. My moods are all over the place. I felt as if the staff were against me. They put me into a camera cell and made me wear a canvas dress and took everything off me. The things don't fit you, they're not right on you. I just felt embarrassed. You need staff who understand and they know what you are talking about. I've started to open up. Some seem genuine. (Remand prisoner)

The contradictions and tensions between treatment and punishment, care and coercion, are well illustrated in the following focus group exchange:

All of us women are vulnerable, we're all vulnerable. Three weeks I was on the 1s [A1] and it did my head in. I was there for punishment and it did my head in. Sometimes I go in [for counselling] but how do we know if she's talking to staff?

Where's the care in healthcare? If I'm feeling down they say there's always someone available and there isn't. If we display a problem they up the medication. If you start questioning anything or you say you have a problem they up the medication. They've made me dependant on anti-depressants and it's not self-sustaining when I leave.

The distress of living in a volatile atmosphere and the potential for the debilitation of women attempting to develop coping strategies was articulated by a settled, sentenced prisoner.

One of the prisoners ... tried to hang herself. We knew something was wrong, she was making funny noises and I pressed the panic button. [Guards shouted] 'It's only Mad ...'; 'She could have least set it up properly'. They C and R'd [Control and Restraint] her and put her down the Block. You're behind the door and don't know what to do. I wanted her to be treated with respect. She needed help. It only took a few seconds to treat her as a person, not a piece of scum. A week later she set herself on fire – she was on a PAR1 [Prisoner at Risk assessment]. I asked why she didn't have a suicide suit on. We had to live with the smell. I couldn't stop crying for days and I was moved. I have lost about five friends and it brought it all back. It was the feeling that they didn't want to help her. Even when I didn't want to cry the tears kept coming.

On the shared site, women were escorted by guards even over short distances, lest they should have contact with young men. Thus, what was presented as a low security environment was tightly controlled and security focused. Professionals interviewed unanimously agreed that the shared site created significant, often insuperable problems and that in an 'ideal world' a women's prison would never be placed within a male prison. A typical comment was, 'women in prison within a prison will never function fully'.

## Conclusion

The research in Mourne House, Maghaberry and Ash House, Hydebank Wood concluded that women's human rights were breached routinely and regularly, including egregious breaches of fundamental rights. Inadequate health and mental health services, lack of a therapeutic regime, indifferent and hostile reactions from guards, limited opportunities for constructive activities and education, coupled with a security-driven regime which included strip searching and excessive regulation and surveillance together contributed to unsafe and destructive environments. The rights to dignity (UDHR, Article 2), life (UDHR, Article 3), freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment (UDHR, Article 5) and to the 'highest standard' of healthcare (United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 12) were systemically breached. The incarceration of female children along with adult women, and the degrading and dangerous conditions in which self-harming girls were held breached the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), especially regarding the 'best interests of the child' (UNCRC, Article 3) and protection of safety (UNCRC, Article 19). The family rights of women and their children were neglected by institutional barriers to meaningful contact (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 10). The requirement in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners that male and female prisoners be detained in separate facilities (Rule 8) and that women should be attended to only by female staff (Rule 53) were ignored.

Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women (CEDAW) notes that violence against women includes, but is not limited to, 'physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state'. Routine strip searching, isolation in punishment or special supervision cells, physical restraint, verbal abuse from prison staff and male prisoners, lack of appropriate mental health care each constitute elements of a continuum of violence (Kelly 1988), expressed by Stanko (1990) as a continuum of unsafety. Incivilities and abuses that demean women, the strip searching of pregnant and menstruating women, and the incarceration of self-harming girls in isolation cells, were evidence of the continua of violence and unsafety directed towards women and girl prisoners in the North, many of whom were survivors of abuse and violence in their families and communities.

The history of women's imprisonment in Northern Ireland raises issues with regard to agency and resistance. In response to the traditional criminological depiction of women in prison as passive, damaged, and 'mad' or 'bad', feminist authors have stressed women's agency and self-direction (Bosworth 1999; Corcoran 2006). As Wahidin (2004:42) comments, contrary to images of passivity, women 'show that within prison they have carved out new spaces in their bid to survive institutional life.' The experience of Northern Ireland demonstrates the importance of considering political will and collective action when analysing the effectiveness and possibilities of resistance. Republican women in Northern

Ireland's prisons generated and sustained collective strength. They suffered pain and degradation, some with long-term repercussions to physical and emotional health, but together remained strong and unbroken. In contrast, the ordinary women prisoners interviewed for this research study were mainly negotiating their days to 'get by'. The revolving door of short remands and sentences; histories of violent and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and mental ill-health; helplessness about their children and families; and the stigma of imprisonment together mitigate against women's and girls' ability to effectively resist the power of the prison.

Several women engaged authority through formal complaints and legal cases, or by directly facing down staff aggression. In general, however, women's agency was diminished by the material circumstances of their detention and by their unmet complex needs. Annie Kelly exposed the dialectical nature of agency in her last letter to her sister, written shortly before her death. She had 'hung myself a pile of times ... I just rip the dress and make a noose. *But I am only doing that cos of the way their treating me*' (cited in Scraton 2006:121, emphasis added). Certainly, Annie resisted ill-treatment by damaging her cell, harming herself and attempting to take her own life, but the Belfast Coroner agreed with the inquest jury that Annie did not die 'by her own hand'. While she placed the noose around her neck, she had been failed by the prison regime. Annie's death was not a result of personal agency, but a consequence of institutionalised neglect and harm over which she had no control.

The culture institutionalised in prisons during the Conflict had its origins in mutual distrust, fear and hostility between guards and politically motivated prisoners. Security measures for all prisoners reflected the demands of managing politically motivated prisoners. The authority of both the institution and the legal system was resisted through collective action by prisoners, supported by communities and community-based paramilitary organisations. Acknowledging the violence inherent in all places of incarceration (Scraton and McCulloch 2009), the impact of the Conflict in the North shaped and exacerbated this violence.

Responding to the research and to a range of critical inspection reports, there has been a halting commitment by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to the development of policies and the implementation of modest changes towards gender-specific, rights-oriented regimes for women. Yet these endeavours have been limited by the strength of the Prison Officers' Association. During the Conflict, guards and their families were exposed to constant danger from paramilitary attacks. Pay and working arrangements recognised the dangerous nature of the job. It is not surprising that in the process of 'normalising' the Prison Service there has been, and remains, resistance to change, particularly involving job losses or diminished conditions of employment. Having experienced direct conflict in prisons, guards were ill-equipped to work with prisoners on reformist programs of rehabilitation, reintegration or resettlement. Throughout the Conflict, the ratio of guards to prisoners was exceptionally high. Since the release of politically affiliated prisoners there has been a surfeit of guards employed on protected contracts. Consequently there has been no recruitment of 'discipline grade' guards for two decades and the predominantly protestant, male composition of the Service has not been modified. A recent internal report records that 80 per cent of prison officer grades are protestant, under eight per cent catholic and 12 per cent 'undetermined'; over 83 per cent of guards are male (NIPS 2009:38).

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, recognises the importance of achieving 'an understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls'. In the North of Ireland this impact was evident in the oppression of politically

motivated women prisoners. This, in turn, has resulted in profound consequences for the treatment of 'ordinary' women prisoners. The recently appointed independent review of prisons in the North, presents an opportunity to bring about transformative change and to adopt Baroness Corston's (2007:24) call for 'a radical change in the way we treat women throughout the whole of the criminal justice system' and a 'fundamental re-design of women's custody'. It is clear from the depth of the problems, the security-oriented regimes, negative staff culture, institutionalised rights-abuse and inappropriate sentencing of women on remand and for non-violent offences for short periods—including the detention of mentally ill women, fine defaulters and immigration detainees—that limited reform will not be sufficient.

The authors have argued for a strategy based on the removal from the prison system of all women except those convicted of the most serious and violent offences. As Jackie Lowthian (2002:164-65) concludes, 'sentencers must be made to respond more appropriately to those women appearing before them and custody must be seen as a last resort'. For those few women sentenced for serious and violent offences, and for who custody is determined as a last resort, any future women's custodial unit must be small, discrete and with its own female management, staff and services. Corston (2007:86) argues for the removal of women's custodial units from the prison services, and to be administered by 'specialists in working with women'. The failure of the Northern Ireland Prison Service to respect the rights of women prisoners or to meet their needs, from the first years of Conflict through to the present, illustrates the imperative of removing women from its control and responsibility.

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