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**‘Republican Women and Catholic Church responses to the strip  
searching of female prisoners in Northern Ireland, 1982-92’**

Dr Niall Gilmartin

*Sociology, Ulster University, Newtownabbey, Northern Ireland*

n.gilmartin@ulster.ac.uk

Dr Margaret M. Scull

*Syracuse University London, London, United Kingdom*

mmscull@syr.edu

## **‘Republican Women and Catholic Church responses to the strip searching of female prisoners in Northern Ireland, 1982-92’**

Although the practice of strip searching of female prisoners in Northern Ireland was used in 1970s, it reached its height in Armagh Jail between 1980 and 1986. Based on in-depth interviews and extensive archival research, the article brings together two different perspectives on strip-searching. It first examines the personal narratives and memories of strip searching by republican women, who interpreted the practice as a repeated violation of the female body, a form of systematic oppression, and a ‘gendered weapon’ deliberately used demoralise and humiliate republican women, and by extension, the wider republican and nationalist community. The article explores how republican women gained an unlikely advocate in denouncing strip searching and the State in the form of some members of the Irish Catholic Church. While the Irish Catholic Church had regularly condemned republican violence, some within the Church viewed strip searching as a moral issue and a clear violation of basic human rights. The article demonstrates how more radical, nationalist members of the Irish Catholic clergy and hierarchy walked a fine line between taking a pastoral concern for their parishioners and making political statements against the British government, leading to questions about the Catholic Church and its role in the Northern Irish conflict.

Keywords: strip searching; Catholic Church; republican women; Northern Ireland; the ‘Troubles’

## Introduction

Conventional accounts of the role of prisons during the period known as the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’<sup>1</sup> tend to privilege male narratives and perspectives, with relatively little attention to women’s experiences. Internment, individual jail breaks and mass escapes, burnings and riots, the ‘no wash’ or dirty protest, the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes, all tend to reflect and project an overwhelmingly androcentric account of prison struggles. Consequently, the conclusion of the 1981 hunger strike in Long Kesh/Maze prison, after the deaths of ten male prisoners, signifies the axiomatic end of the ‘prison protest’ and an overall de-escalation of the role of jails in the conflict in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> However, for republican women in Armagh and other jails, gendered forms of punishment not only continued but were accompanied by a significant increase in strip searching from October 1982 onwards, hereafter becoming a frequent and violent part of the women’s prison regime for the next ten years. Despite the propensity of predominant, androcentric accounts of the conflict, an impressive and growing body of work not only countered the conspicuous absence of republican women, but also shed light on the gendered nature of war and violence. The prolific work of republican women addressed their relative ‘invisibility’ within both the conflict narrative in general, but also with a specific focus on women’s jail experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Everything about this conflict remains contested, including the dates it formally began and ended. However, most scholars agreed it began with police attacks on the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in October 1968 and ended with the signing of the peace accord in 1998. For more, see Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Books, 2012); David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles* (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See John Bew, Martyn Frampton, and Iñigo Gurruchaga, *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country* (London: Hurst&Company, 2009), 86-93; English, *Armed Struggle*, 187-226; McKittrick and McVea, *Making Sense*, 156-172; For specific histories of those strikes that argue the same see David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 429-430; Tom Collins, *The Irish Hunger Strike* (Dublin: Island Book Company, 1986), 585-616; Thomas Hennessey, *Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher’s Battle with the IRA 1980-81* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 466-470; Pdraig O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 237-287.

Various outputs including pamphlets, magazines, film documentaries, and books provided welcome platforms that gave insights into the often-marginalised experiences of women in prison during the conflict.<sup>3</sup> In recent times academic scholarship has also documented women's own stories and voices but their robust analysis, particularly of the 'no wash' protest period as well as strip searching and other forms of harassment by state forces, shed important light on the extent of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as well as the perennial tensions and conflicting identities of nationalism, feminism, and Catholicism among republican women.<sup>4</sup> While some have persuasively argued and highlighted the role of women's imprisonment as a form of institutionalised punishment by the authorities, emphasising the daily experiences of brutality,<sup>5</sup> other interventions shifted the balance of attention from victimhood towards recognising women's agency, resistance, and the politicisation of their gendered prison experiences. Not only were women willing to engage in a 'no wash' protest and the age-old tactic of hunger striking, but their actions in smearing excreta and menstrual blood on their cell walls effectively transformed their bodies from solely sites of violence into sites of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Theresa O'Keefe argues for a broader definition of 'Troubles'-related sexual violence to include threats, harassment, and even microaggressions, as an important part of reframing women's prison experiences, particularly strip searching, as

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Evelyn Brady, Eva Patterson, Kate McKinney, Rosie Hamill, and Pauline Jackson (eds) *In the Footsteps of Anne- Stories of Republican ex-prisoners* (Belfast: Shanway Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Theresa O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Mary Corcoran, *Out of Order: The Political Imprisonment of Women in Northern Ireland, 1972–1999* (Devon: Willan Publishing, 2006); Christina Loughran, 'Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,' *Feminist Review* 23 (1986): 59-79; Azrini Wahidin, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland Women, Political Protest and the Prison Experience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Linda Moore and Phil Scraton, *The Incarceration of Women: Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Theresa O'Keefe, 'Menstrual Blood as a Weapon of Resistance', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8 (2006): 535-556.

part of a continuum of state-sponsored sexual violence, deliberately and systematically used as an instrument of war.<sup>7</sup> While these important works zealously demonstrated the centrality of gender to understanding women's conflict-related experiences, gender-blind accounts of imprisonment during the 'Troubles' abound and endure. Though Seán McConville's tome on imprisonment during the 'Troubles' offers a relatively comprehensive and detailed account of women in Armagh, unfortunately, it suffers from a complete lack of engagement with the power dynamics and significance of gender in shaping women's and men's conflict experiences, including incarceration.<sup>8</sup> McConville contends that republican men were 'numerically and proportionately far more likely to be strip-searched than women' and frames strip-searching as an unfortunate but necessary 'security' measure widely used in many other western countries. Furthermore, McConville argues the Catholic priests involved in anti-strip-searching campaigns tended to overlook the dangers posed to the prison regime by republican women who 'had shown a willingness – a determination – to take life', and were instead motivated more by a subjective moral indignation against the violation of women's modesty and dignity. This article offers a different analysis to that of McConville's. Using a mixed method approach of in-depth interviews, religious and state archive material, memoirs, and media reports, this article adds to these important works, exploring the memories and understandings of strip searching from the perspective of republican women. The article's unique contribution, however, primarily resides in its thorough documentation of the role of some of the Catholic clergy in the campaign against strip searches, revealing that their transnational networks meant the

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<sup>7</sup> Theresa O'Keefe, 'Policing unruly women: The state and sexual violence during the Northern Irish Troubles', *Women's Studies International Forum* 62 (2017): 69-77.

<sup>8</sup> Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1960-2000: Braiding Rage and Sorrow* (London: Routledge, 2021), 882-922.

issue reached American and British audiences. Our analysis demonstrates that some Catholic clergy shared the same perspective on strip-searching as republican women, seeing it a human right violation and deliberate strategy of humiliation.

The purpose of the article is two-fold: first, it argues that republican women understood strip searching as a deliberate and highly gendered form of sexual violence, interpreted as part of a wider pattern of practices including sexual slurs, threats, and other forms of degradation. At the same time, the strip searching of female republican prisoners was also a form of communicative practice aimed at emasculating the male 'enemy' and wider republican community who could not 'protect their imprisoned women'. The second aim is to demonstrate that some religious actors from within the Catholic Church saw the strip searching of female prisoners as a violation of their human dignity, emphasising that the practice violated the sacredness of the female body. However, members of the Church disagreed on how or even if they should raise this issue as the women in question had committed violent acts. Consequently, the clergy who did work to end strip searching became politicised through their campaign. This article offers in-depth analysis of how two very different groups, who disagreed on the use of 'armed struggle', shared political purpose on the issue of strip searching. We begin by a detailed examination of SGBV as a deliberate and strategic weapon of war, followed by a discussion of our methodological approach to the study, relying on a combination of author conducted interviews and archive materials. Next, we examine the experiences and understandings of strip searching from the perspectives of some of those who suffered and survived it, arguing that the practice was interpreted as a deliberate gendered measure by the British government to undermine the prisoners' morale. From there, we introduce members of the Irish Catholic Church who denounced the practice but feared their words could fuel republican propaganda.

## Defining Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

This article is concerned with the specific practice of strip searching, and therefore requires some definitional clarity. Strip searches require the removal and/or forced removal of clothing without consent to enable inspections of the naked body that are intrusive, humiliating, and harmful. According to Michael Grewcock and Vicki Sentas, strip searches are an ‘inherently humiliating and degrading’ violation of the right to bodily integrity for any person, typically characterised as an ‘enforced nudity’, and includes the physical, internal probing without consent, and is often experienced as a form of sexual assault.<sup>9</sup> Strip searching as a process makes those subject to it vulnerable and fearful, regardless of whether the officer is acting with respect and in accordance with the law. The practice has been found to trigger prior experiences of trauma and abuse, can generate harmful psychological conditions including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and is widely understood as an extrajudicial punishment, including as a form of sexual humiliation for ‘breaking down the resistance of detainees.’<sup>10</sup>

Various forms of gendered violence were exercised by the state throughout the conflict; at the hands of soldiers, prison guards, and police officers, women have experienced strip searches, rape, sexual assault, verbal threats, fondling, and a litany of abuses.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is important to frame strip searching as a form of SGBV, deliberately implemented as a tactic of war. The diligent endeavours of feminist researchers persuasively argue that instead of being driven by male sexual urges, gratification, or desires in individuals, conflict-related SGBV is imbued in corporeal and symbolic relations of gender power, constituting a form of social and political control, and

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Grewcock and Vicki Sentas, *Rethinking Strip Searches by NSW Police* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Theresa O’Keefe, ‘Menstrual Blood’; O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*.



therefore is deployed as a deliberate and strategic weapon of war in the pursuit of military and political goals.<sup>12</sup> Susan Brownmiller cogently demonstrated that rape and sexual violence against women is an endemic and central feature of all armed conflicts throughout recorded human history, and paved the way for a body of feminist work which situated SGBV against women as a product of male power and domination over female subjugation.<sup>13</sup> While women and girls constitute the overwhelming majority of victims and survivors of sexual violence, research documenting women's roles as perpetrators of sexual violence and men and boys experiences as victims prompted a firm analytical shift from sex to gender. Gender (understood as socially constructed understandings of masculinities and femininities) replaced sex (seen as a given rooted in biology) as a framework for understanding the motivations for, the use of, and the effects of the "weapon" of wartime sexual violence.<sup>14</sup> Acts of war-time sexual violence can therefore be understood as gendered assaults and a form of social power, control and domination constituted by unequal gender relations.

The predominant ethnonational element of many contemporary wars over the last 40 years or more means that symbolically the victim's national identity is also feminised and humiliated.<sup>15</sup> Wars, violent conflicts between people, as well as sexual attacks on women, are historical and social processes that are carried out collectively and, thus, must have a collective meaning.<sup>16</sup> The ascribed roles of women as national

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<sup>12</sup> Miranda Alison, 'Wartime sexual violence: Women's human rights and questions of masculinity,' *Review of International Studies* 33 (2007): 75–90; Ruth Seifert, 'The second front: The logic of sexual violence in wars,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 19 (1996): 35–43; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, 'Curious erasures: the sexual in wartime sexual violence,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20 (2018): 295-314.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 'Curious erasures'.

<sup>15</sup> Alison, 'Wartime sexual violence'.

<sup>16</sup> Seifert, 'The second front'.

symbols and biological reproducers within ethno-national collectives<sup>17</sup> engenders significant symbolic power to SGBV as ‘enemy women’ and their bodies become territories to be seized and conquered.<sup>18</sup> The emasculation of ‘enemy’ men takes the form of robbing them of their ability to ‘protect their women’. Rather than viewing wartime rape and sexual violence as an insidious but inevitable by-product of armed conflict, it is essential to consider how women’s bodies become a gendered battlefield on which notions of militarised masculinities are fought.<sup>19</sup> In such instances, rape and sexual violence are not solely vile acts against particular individuals but also highly symbolic acts of conquest, control, and domination against the whole group. Evidence from Rwanda and the Balkans in the early to mid-1990s, the Sierra Leone conflict in 1994, or the armed hostilities between India and Pakistan during partition in 1947 demonstrates the planned weaponization of sexual violence as a means to demoralise, punish, and humiliate a whole people.<sup>20</sup> In the cases of both Colombia and Libya, sexual violence was referred to as a form of punishment, where the intention was to use sexual violence specifically to shame the particular groups attacked.<sup>21</sup> Conflict-based sexual assaults on women seek to destroy the social and cultural stability of ethno-national groups, therefore sexual assaults on women of a community, culture, or nation can be

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<sup>17</sup> Feminist scholars convincingly contend that ‘all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender’ (Anne McClintock, ‘Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family’, *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 61-80), with men largely assigned active roles in fighting and women assigned to symbolic representations of the ‘motherland’ and that of biological reproducer. Because many ethno-nationalist groupings are premised (erroneously) on the notion of a common blood descent, women’s bodies are viewed as the source of ethnic groups and are therefore often highly regulated by its own male members and violently attacked by its adversaries.

<sup>18</sup> Maja Korać, ‘Understanding ethnic-national identity and its meaning: Questions from women’s experience,’ *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19 (1996): 137; Alison, *Women and Political Violence*.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Sjoberg, *Gender, War, and Conflict* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Pamela DeLargy, ‘Sexual Violence and Women’s Health in War,’ in Carol Cohn (ed) *Women and Wars* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Sara E Davies and Jacqui True, ‘Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: Bringing gender analysis back in,’ *Security Dialogue* 46 (2015): 506.

regarded - and is so regarded - as a symbolic assault of the body of that community.<sup>22</sup> As will be discussed later, the forced strip searching of republican women not only impacted those who suffered and endured the practice, symbolically, it was used to demoralise and attack the wider republican community.

## **Methods**

This article brings together two pieces of separate but related forms of field research. The research with republican women is based on semi-structured interviews with 40 women carried out by one of the authors in 2012 and 2013. Participants were from across the North of Ireland and identified themselves as members or activists within the Provisional IRA and/or Sinn Féin, generally referred to as the republican movement. Thirty-one participants identified themselves as members of the IRA and/or the 'republican movement', six were solely members of Sinn Féin, while three identified their role as 'republican activist'. In terms of age, most participants were in their fifties and sixties at the time of interview. The names of research participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Accessing diocesan archives in Ireland has often proved challenging to historians as many files from the period are yet to be made available. As a result, this article has supplemented Irish sources with English and American diocesan archival material. Diocesan archives generally operate with a 100-year rule from the date of a priest's death, leaving some of the relevant papers unavailable. Materials concerning bishops are regulated differently and the Irish Catholic Church typically releases documents relating to a particular bishop 30 years after his death. The American and English and Welsh Catholic Churches operate a 30-year rule from the date the

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<sup>22</sup> Seifert, 'The second front'.

document was created. To further supplement this material, one of the authors consulted British government records, media, and religious memoirs.

### **Republican Women and the Conflict**

Women on the front lines of Irish national struggles are not a phenomenon unique to the ‘Troubles’. Historically, there were relatively large numbers of women active in the cause of militant Irish republicanism during the revolutionary period of 1916 to 1921. The rebirth of armed republicanism in 1969, particularly in the form of the Provisional IRA, saw women undertaking a myriad of roles in the evolving conflict. The republican movement initially operated along a strict gender division of roles. Breaking with ‘tradition’ in the early 1970s, republican women were not sated with the prospect of playing an auxiliary role through Cumann na mBan,<sup>23</sup> and, instead, demanded a full and equal role within the IRA.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the conflict, republican women’s bodies became the focus of struggle and resistance, no more so than in prisons during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> In March 1972, Liz McKee became the first woman interned and from that point women were arrested, detained, interrogated, and imprisoned. State forces often used women’s bodies as key ‘battlegrounds’, attempting to extract information from female suspects using sexual slurs, strip searches, insinuation, and actual threats of rape.<sup>26</sup> Menstruating women in detention were denied sanitary towels and personal

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<sup>23</sup> Founded in 1914, Cumann na mBan was a female auxiliary force, providing supporting roles for the Irish Volunteers, which became the IRA in 1919. Each subsequent manifestation of the IRA since retained Cumann na mBan as an important part of armed republicanism, yet male IRA members consistently deemed it as supplementary.

<sup>24</sup> Alison, *Women and Political Violence*, 187; Margaret Ward, ‘Times of Transition: Republican Women, Feminism and Political Representation’ in Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (eds) *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 184-201.

<sup>25</sup> A detailed overview of republican women’s incarceration during the Troubles is beyond the scope of this article. For furthering reading, see Brady, et al. *In the Footsteps of Anne*; O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*; Corcoran, *Out of Order*; Wahidin, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace*.

<sup>26</sup> O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*, 35.

hygiene. Following the removal of special category status by the British government in March 1976, 32 sentenced women embarked on a campaign of non-cooperation with the prison regime, refusing to comply with compulsory work.<sup>27</sup> While the mainstream narrative suggests the Armagh women joined their male comrades in Long Kesh/Maze Prison on the ‘no wash’ protest in solidarity, Theresa O’Keefe instead argues the women took up the protest in response to a series of events within Armagh Prison on 7 February 1980.<sup>28</sup> Although three republican women joined the 1980 hunger strike, the republican narrative has largely overlooked their contribution.<sup>29</sup> Although the 1981 hunger strike signalled an end to the ‘mirror searches’ against men, strip searching of women increased after 1982. Refusing to consent to such practices, women were physically restrained by several prison warders (typically including male warders) and clothing forcibly removed, which continued into the 1990s. Following the closure of Armagh Prison in 1986, the prison service moved female prisoners to Mourne House, the women’s unit in the newly built Maghaberry Prison complex, near Lisburn.

### **‘Breaking Us, Degrading Us, Wearing Us Down’: Women’s Experiences and Narratives of Strip Searching**

The research conducted with republican women was part of a project principally concerned with their conflict transition experiences since the 1994 ceasefires. Time and again strip searching was raised by research participants during interviews as a prominent source of anger, suffering, resentment, and resistance. For those interviewees

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<sup>27</sup> Corcoran, *Out of Order*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> O’Keefe, ‘Menstrual Blood’, 545-546.

<sup>29</sup> Niall Gilmartin, *Female Combatants after Armed Struggle: Lost in Transition?* (London: Routledge, 2018); O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*; Maria Power, ‘A Republican who Wants to Further Women’s Rights’: Women, Provisional Republicanism, Feminism and Conflict in Northern Ireland, 1972-98’ in Gillian McIntosh and Diane Urquhart (eds) *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 153-170.

who did not have any direct experience, there was a discernible sense of solidarity broadly constituted by a shared belief that strip searching was something specifically used against republican women. Every prisoner leaving the prison for whatever reason was strip searched. In 1983, in response to considerable public condemnation of the practice, the British government announced that ‘routine’ strip searching would be abandoned but ‘random’ strip searching would continue for ‘obvious’ security reasons.<sup>30</sup> The form and frequency with which strip searches were conducted from October 1982 onwards did not follow a consistent pattern, fluctuating between regular strip searching for remand prisoners on the one hand and random, mass strip searching, and cell searching on the other. For example, republican prisoners Martina Anderson and Ella O’Dwyer endured more than 400 strip searches while on remand and in solitary confinement at the top security, all-male prison, HMP Brixton, between 1984 and 1985.<sup>31</sup> For those awaiting trial, strip searching was a frequent occurrence as prisoners were required to report to the judge weekly. Strip searches could also be conducted before and after visits with relatives or friends.<sup>32</sup> Those conducting the strip searches did not discriminate based on age or circumstance, as both young and old were forced through the process, as were women who were pregnant or had just given birth.<sup>33</sup>

During the research interviews, strip searching was never far from the surface of the conversation for those respondents who had that experience, sometimes on countless occasions, indicating the long-term impact of the practice. For some it remained a source of distress despite the passing of more than three decades. ‘Siobhan’, a life-long

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<sup>30</sup> Wahidin, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace*, 175.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> Begoña Aretxaga, ‘The sexual games of the body politic: fantasy and state violence in Northern Ireland’, *Cult Med Psychiatry* 25 (2001): 1-27.

<sup>33</sup> Corcoran, *Out of Order*; Wahidin, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace*, 173.

republican from Derry, fell ill during her time at Armagh and required frequent visits to medical centres and hospitals. She described one particular episode:

I was brought back to Armagh jail and I was so weak at that stage and I was taken to the strip area and told to strip off but I was so weak because no food was staying down and I fainted and they brought me around and then they strip searched me and then put me onto the hospital wing and then after two weeks they said we're moving you to another hospital so they took me back to Craigavon Hospital and I was operated on twice. What actually happened was a massive cyst on my ovaries and that had busted and the poison had gone through me and the poison was coming out through my system and that's why I couldn't eat. So they brought me out to the recovery room and pulled a night dress over me and 15 minutes later they put me in an ambulance and brought me back to Armagh and onto the hospital wing. Then a screw walks in and says that I have to strip search you and I had nothing on but a night dress; I had contact with nobody only the RUC and screws and she insisted and she took the blankets off me and lifted the night dress up.

In the mid-1980s, 'Helen' was on remand and was in jail only a few weeks when she discovered she was pregnant. Like 'Siobhan', her need for medical care alongside her status as a remand prisoner ensured that she was the target of strip searching on many occasions:

I found out that I was pregnant and that was a shock I can tell you. So that was another thing because each week I had to go out for check-ups and then morning sickness and getting strip searched during pregnancy. I was getting strip searched for remand hearing and then check-ups which is wild degrading anyway but especially when you're pregnant. And this was going on the whole time and even now it's still not a story that is out there; few people outside of the women know about it. But the strip searching thing was simply aimed at breaking us, degrading us, wearing us down and trying to break the women.

Most research participants described their regular ordeal of strip searching as terrifying, degrading, humiliating, and shameful. Some compared the feeling of clothing being forcibly removed by female and male prison guards as akin to rape and sexual abuse. As remarked by 'Helen' and other interviewees, the harrowing experiences were exacerbated by a relative lack of recognition and acknowledgement by the wider nationalist community, coupled with the discernible emotions and tensions surrounding this issue, which for many, remains pervasive and unresolved. Republican narratives

and memorial works relating to imprisonment pivot round the ‘heroic’ sacrifices of male prisoners in the H-Blocks arguing their efforts effectively ended the ‘prison protest’. The predominance of the male prison narrative has repeatedly overshadowed the continuity of prison struggles by republican women post-1981.

In the decade between 1982 and 1992, strip searching and sexual violence were central aspects to the everyday penal existence of female republican prisoners.<sup>34</sup> Prior to 1982, female prisoners were only strip searched on entering the prison, but the practice drastically increased.<sup>35</sup> The possibility and likelihood of being strip searched was etched into the daily existence of female republican prisoners. The power of strip searching as a gendered method of subordination and control resided principally in its presence as an existential threat to all female prisoners at all times. ‘Linda’ joined the republican movement in the early 1970s and had a wide experience of the jails and interrogation centres. She recalled the perennial presence of sexualised violence and threats:

That was always there, that threat, that sexual threat; even when I was in Castlereagh, there were always undertones of threats of sexual abuse directed to women because you’re sitting in a room full of men and I always found that the most difficult part of the interrogation because you are sitting in there, on your own ... this idea of ‘we can do whatever we want’.

All research participants were cognisant that the use of strip searching and other forms of sexual threats and violence constituted a strategic use of gender and sex by the state as a deliberate weapon of war. In contrast to the strip searching of republican women, the construction of meanings associated with the bodily attacks on male republicans are invariably presented as effectively genderless. Accounts of women and the conflict contend that British forces repeatedly singled out republican women to intimidate,

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<sup>34</sup> Wahidin, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace*.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Fr Joe McVeigh, 31 May 2017.



humiliate, and reinforce women's sense of powerlessness in the hope of breaking the republican movement.<sup>36</sup> Women were targeted not only as republicans but also because they were republican women. Unlike the physical attacks on the body that both male and female republicans experienced throughout the period of 1976 to 1981, the use of strip searching expanded the state's 'repertoire of violence' and subjugation.<sup>37</sup> While clothing and sanitary towels were forcibly removed, many of the interviewees spoke of the humiliation and vulnerability of 'being naked', of being observed, watched, jeered, among others. The prevailing conservative culture at the time exacerbated that sense of 'nakedness', with many contending that the forced removal of women's clothing and their subjection to the observation of prison guards was deliberately implemented not only because they were women, but because they were Catholic women, as 'Louise' explained:

Well it was a lot harder for women because they were women; like women had no sanitary towels for their monthly periods and issues that we had to deal with. To me they did more to try and break the women more than the men because of our upbringing, because we were Catholic, because we were nationalist, because we were women. Now the men got it bad but I think it was worse for the women.

As a tool of war, sexual violence against women is effective not only because it violates the female body but precisely because it is given meaning through patriarchal norms that render the female body as inferior and a subject of control and regulation. This occurs particularly in societies where sex, sexuality, and sexual violence is deemed culturally taboo.<sup>38</sup> In Northern Irish society, both Catholicism and forms of Protestantism have served to entrench a visceral conservative culture whereby sex,

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<sup>36</sup> Helen Harris and Eileen Healy, *Strong about it all: Rural and urban women's experiences of the Security Forces* (Derry: Northern Ireland North West Women's/Human Rights Project, 2001); Sharon Pickering, *Women, policing and resistance in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Jean Wood, 'Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When is Wartime Rape Rare?' *Politics & Society* 37 (2009): 131-161.

<sup>38</sup> Davies and True, 'Reframing'.

bodies, and female bodily functions are seen as shameful and therefore to be hidden.<sup>39</sup> In the working class culture of Catholic Belfast, rape and sexual violence fell into the space of the unspeakable, evoking feelings of deep vulnerability and shame.<sup>40</sup>

Research has shown that sexual harassment of women by security forces was widespread and systematic outside as well as inside the prisons.<sup>41</sup> Strip searching came to epitomise the resolve of the security services to have women submit to the process of criminalisation and surveillance by taking control of women's nakedness. This form of visual surveillance authorises other forms of bodily invasion. The objective of 'breaking women' was understood by women in this study who had experienced strip searching as being particularly vicious with the sole purpose of breaking their collective resistance against the prison regime.<sup>42</sup> While the degradation of male prisoners found widespread public expression in the forms of smuggled testimonies, books, documentaries, films, artistic expressions such as drawings and murals as part of the republican struggle, the movement was largely silent on the treatment of women. All respondents asserted that while the sexual violence against female republican prisoners was widely known, it was rarely publicly acknowledged.

The framing of strip searching therefore needs to be situated in a broader view of sexualised and gendered threats and conduct against women by state forces. The cultural significance of sexual violence against 'enemy women' is primarily constituted by the symbolic conquest of 'enemy women' in an effort to inflict violence and trauma on women but also as an important symbolic form of humiliation for enemy men; women's bodies are thus transformed into the battlegrounds for adversarial formations

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<sup>39</sup> O'Keefe, 'Menstrual Blood', 538.

<sup>40</sup> Aretxaga 'The sexual games', 14.

<sup>41</sup> Pickering, *Women, policing and resistance*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

of masculinity.<sup>43</sup> Within gendered nationalist discourse, symbolism, and cultures, women's assigned roles are symbolic markers of the nation as well as biological reproducers, thus sexual violence against 'enemy women' is also concerned with asserting domination over the 'enemy'. The actions of prison staff not only represented insidious acts of sexual violence against women, they also functioned to symbolise the emasculation of republican men. Unsurprisingly, in contrast to promoting heroic tales of the martyrdom of the likes of Bobby Sands, the mostly male constituency of Sinn Féin and wider republican community resisted hearing anything about the sexualized violence against women prisoners. Some prisoners' boyfriends and male relatives questioned women's will to resist strip searches as unnecessarily endangering themselves.<sup>44</sup> For some participants in this research, they stated it was the first time that they had openly spoken of a strip searching directly outside their circle of republican peers.

The impact of strip searching female inmates was therefore multidimensional. First, at the individual level, it was a gendered instrument for inflicting violence, trauma, and degradation on individual prisoners. Second, its widespread and systematic use across multiple prisons in Ireland and Britain sought to undermine the morale and solidarity of all female republican prisoners. Third, it was concerned with and saturated in symbolic communications regarding the humiliation not only of 'enemy forces' but the overall republican community. According to Sharon Pickering, strip searching 'came to epitomise... the resolve of the security services to have women submit to the

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<sup>43</sup> Meredith Turshen, 'The Political Economy of Rape: An Analysis of Systemic Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women During Armed Conflict in Africa' in Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark (eds) *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 55-68.

<sup>44</sup> Aretxaga 'The sexual games', 14.

process of criminalisation and surveillance by taking control of women's nakedness'.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, the common thread throughout the research interviews was a collective interpretation of strip searching as an instrument of dominance enabled and augmented by structures of gendered power intersecting with ethnic and religious identities. For research participants, the use of strip searching represented a deliberate, gendered form of systemic violence and domination, linked to and part of a wider suite of state tactics and practices designed to 'break the republican struggle'. Not for the first time, or the last, women's roles, experiences, and perspectives were silenced or at best, spoken only in hushed tones. Despite this, women and some men within the republican movement sought to highlight and end the practice of strip searching through the Sinn Féin Women's Department, established in 1979, leading to years of public protests. Several non-republican organisations, particularly trade unions and left-leaning feminist groups such as Women Against Imperialism were also active in the campaigns against strip searching particularly from 1980 onwards.<sup>46</sup> Some of the most vocal and prominent supporters of the Stop Strip Searching Campaign, however, were clerical members of the Catholic Church.

### **The Catholic Church and the Strip Searching of Republican Women**

The Irish Catholic Church walked a fine line with the issue of strip searching. While more radical members of the clergy were eager to call attention to the injustices of the practice when it began in a regularised, systematic form in 1982, the institutional

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<sup>45</sup> Pickering, *Women, policing and resistance*, 181.

<sup>46</sup> The practice of strip searching was a source of visceral friction within wider British and Irish feminism at the time. Unfortunately, a comprehensive discussion of this issue is beyond the scope and word limitations of this article. See 'Armagh- not a women's issue', *Spare Rib*, June 1980; 'Republicanism- what our Irish sisters think', *Spare Rib*, October 1980; 'Women in Ireland- Our Struggle Too', *Spare Rib*, May 1983; 'Armagh visit', *Spare Rib*, May 1984.

Church members, bishops and more conservative clergy members, believed their concern over this issue could be perceived as partisan by their Protestant, Unionist, and Loyalist (PUL) community counterparts. Throughout the conflict the institutional Church remained wary of any ties to perceived support for republicans or any connotation that may be seen as propaganda for their cause. The Church consistently denounced IRA violence. Yet, despite these condemnations, some members of the Catholic Church provided spiritual and pastoral care for prisoners as chaplains and attempted to raise awareness of injustices outside the prison, specifically the British government policy of internment without trial. For many republicans, though, this was not enough, and they routinely denounced the Church for its inaction and perceived bias against them. Irish priests and bishops regularly condemned republican violence, asking their parishioners not to support those who sought a united Ireland by the physical force tradition. For example, members of the PUL community perceived the Irish Catholic Church as supporting republicanism because the church neither formally excommunicated republicans nor denied them Catholic funerals. While the Catholic Church was not the only Christian organisation to condemn strip searching, its more radical members were by far the most vocal in their disapproval. Therefore, the issue of strip searching of republican prisoners presented the Irish Catholic Church with a tightrope between denouncing a human rights violation and acting as a mouthpiece for republican propaganda.

The context and centrality of Catholicism during the period in question and its highly conservative and influential standpoints on sexuality and women's bodies cannot be overstated. According to Tom Inglis, the Catholic church and (through clerical influence) the state were major players in creating a sexual regime where values of chastity, virginity and modesty retained a firm grip on society, fundamentally shaping

popular individual views on sex and sexuality.<sup>47</sup> Unsurprisingly, much of the focus of regulation and control was targeted at women, their bodies, and their sexuality. The stereotypical and coveted notions of the shy Irish colleen, silent about herself and her emotional needs, reflects a historical reality in which there was a strict silence imposed on sex and sexuality in general and on female sexuality in particular.<sup>48</sup> Seán McConville believes the priests involved in attempting to stop strip searching played on these moral stereotypes about Irish women to manipulate the public into ending the practice.<sup>49</sup>

In Northern Ireland, with the Catholic Church, acting as a shadow state for a Catholic community lacking political power, provided first and second level education, welfare through its voluntary organisations, and leisure-time pursuits.<sup>50</sup> Therefore the predominance of Catholicism among the wider nationalist and republican community made nakedness taboo, enhancing the efficacy of deliberately weaponizing strip searching<sup>51</sup> while cultivating an unreceptive terrain for the harrowing testimonies of strip searching and sexual violence against female inmates. Aileen Blaney argues that the marginalisation of women prisoners in the media and in political culture reflects the ‘anxiety shared by the media, mainstream historical discourse and Irish Republicanism provoked by the abjection of the female body.’<sup>52</sup> At this time, society viewed the female body as a sacred space, one that needed to be protected as well as policed.

Despite this, republican women gained an unlikely ally in the form of passionate and committed members of the Catholic clergy. Some Irish priests and religious sisters

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Inglis, ‘Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland,’ *Éire-Ireland* 40 (2005): 9-37.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners*, 882-922.

<sup>50</sup> Rob Kitchin and Karen Lysaght, ‘Sexual citizenship in Belfast, Northern Ireland,’ *Gender, Place & Culture* 11 (2004): 87.

<sup>51</sup> O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Aileen Blaney, ‘All’s Fair in Love and War?: Representations of Prison Life in *Silent Grace*’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 15 (2008): 394.

who worked in prisons believed the process violated human rights and was emotionally and physically harmful. These clergy members wrote letters and appeals, published pamphlets, and attempted to raise awareness of the practice.<sup>53</sup> Strip searching divided the more conservative and more pro-nationalist members of the institutional Catholic Church, leading some outsiders to question whether the church nurtured a political agenda in relation to a united Ireland. Bishop Edward Daly, of Derry, and Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, the Primate of All Ireland and the head of the Irish Catholic Church between 1978-90, represented the nationalist faction of the Irish bishops who denounced the British on this issue. The most vocal group on the subject were the prison chaplains who witnessed this emotional and physical turmoil. Some spoke to the press and to human rights organisations in an attempt to eliminate the practice. Fr Raymond Murray, an established community activist and the prison chaplain at Armagh, was able to raise significant awareness of strip searching of female prisoners. Other priests like Fathers Joe McVeigh, Des Wilson, Declan Deane, and Donal McKeown, now the Bishop of Derry, petitioned the more vocal and nationalist hierarchy to visit the prisons and speak with prisoners about their experiences.

Many male prisoners became psychologically scarred from the forced strip searching they received, which was often a daily occurrence. Fr Denis Faul wrote to the editor of the *Irish Press*, Tim Pat Coogan, describing that the emotionally draining practice followed male prisoners after they served their sentences. Former inmates under tension behaved ‘in a bizarre fashion’ and a ‘wealth of medical and psychiatric evidence’ was presented against the British government at Strasborg to support Faul’s claims.<sup>54</sup> However, the guards strip searched not only female prisoners, but on at least

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Fr Joe McVeigh, 31 May 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive (CTOMLA), Fr Denis Faul Papers 1985-86, Fr Denis Faul to Tim Pat Coogan, undated.

one occasion, also prison chaplain Fr Raymond Murray. The priest endured ‘strenuous body searching’ in February 1982, which had not previously happened to other prison chaplains, and called the experience ‘humiliating’.<sup>55</sup> His own strip searching episode, alongside his longstanding passion for justice, galvanised Murray, yet his role as an official prison chaplain and employee of the British government limited his ability to publicly raise awareness of the issue. Therefore, the republican women in Armagh allowed Murray to confide their experiences to his friend and fellow activist Faul. In response, Faul wrote to the predominantly nationalist newspaper the *Irish News* as well as to Cardinal Ó Fiaich and Lord Gowrie to complain about Murray’s experience and the treatment of the female prisoners.

A Catholic upbringing could add to this sense of shame and embarrassment, where according to Fr Faul ‘the strictest standards of modesty were impressed upon them as a matter of conscience.’<sup>56</sup> Tied to this shame, Fr Joe McVeigh believed strip searching became a larger issue for women than men because they would have been more ‘embarrassed’, especially when they were menstruating.<sup>57</sup> Many research participants said their Catholicism and the prevailing conservative culture at the time was a primary motivation behind the widespread use of strip searching against women.

**Lorna:** Strip searching was designed solely to break the republican prisoners down because they felt it was, obviously being republican prisoners meant we were catholic and so catholic women tend to be shy and would hardly change in front of other women after a shower and they thought that if we strip search them, then it will really break them down. So you were strip searched; I went to remand every week, so I was strip searched leaving the jail and coming back into the jail but part of the regime was to break you down, that once you were sentenced, that you would become a what they would call a conforming prisoner, so their actions would make you not want to go on the republican wing, that was all part of it. It

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<sup>55</sup> ‘‘Humiliating treatment’ of Father Murray’, *Irish News*, 5 Feb. 1982.

<sup>56</sup> Denis Faul, *The Stripping Naked of Women Prisoners in Armagh Gaol: November 1982-January 1984* (Armagh, 1984), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Fr Joe McVeigh, 31 May 2017.



was all psychological to try and break you down... And *all* the strip searching, *all* the strip searching [participant's emphasis] they carried out never produced one thing, nothing was ever found. So strip searching was to break, as they seen it, these catholic women and they'll find this strip searching utterly and totally degrading, which it was, but it was designed to try and break us.

The contention of 'Lorna', like many other republican women regarding the linkages between their Catholicism and the shame, embarrassment, and stigma resulting from forced strip searching certainly substantiates the views of McVeigh and Faul. Yet here some members of the Catholic Church were exposing conditions women faced in the prison. Alternatively, it was the mainstream, male republican movement that reinforced that shame through its silence on the strip searching of republican women in these prisons. Outspoken priests like Faul, supplied with information from Murray, wrote and distributed numerous pamphlets concerning strip searching in Armagh. At Easter 1983, Faul published a pamphlet focusing on strip searching over the course of the previous year, which printed private letters from Murray to the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Prior.<sup>58</sup> By 1984, Faul added to the debate with another booklet including a statement by a female prisoner who experienced a strip search while she menstruated.<sup>59</sup> As Catholic prison chaplain and an employee of the prison system, Murray was unable to attribute his name to these publications but supplied Faul with his own testimony as well as that of the republican women. The pair hoped to spread their message outside of Ireland and Britain to raise awareness within the all-important Irish diaspora, who could potentially use their money and influence to stop the practice. Faul corresponded with concerned Irish Americans, including the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who asked the priest for updated statistics on strip searches of female

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<sup>58</sup> Denis Faul, *The Stripping Naked of Women Prisoners in Armagh Prison 1982-83* (Armagh, Easter, 1983).

<sup>59</sup> Faul, *Stripping Naked of Women Prisoners in Armagh Gaol: November 1982-January 1984*.

prisoners.<sup>60</sup> By this point, their efforts demonstrated that Faul and Murray acted outside a purely pastoral duty to the prisoners: their efforts were now undoubtedly political. Furthermore, the subject of women's bodies was incredibly taboo in Ireland. Contraception, menstruation, and sexuality were not discussed in 1980s Ireland more broadly because of the conservative nature of the Catholic Church. Yet, they were only two members of the Church and, if questioned, the bishops could dismiss their actions as two radicals and not representative.

The Help the Prisoners Committee, of which Cardinal Ó Fiaich was a member, grew concerned over the adverse effect the strip searching had on the prisoners' mental health. On behalf of the committee, Faul and Murray released a press statement warning that the practice was 'a matter of human rights'.<sup>61</sup> The priests agreed with the Church of Ireland chaplain at Armagh, Canon H.S. Mortimer, that strip searching damaged the life of the prisoner and should not be used as punishment. It was press statements like these that caused the British government to grow concerned at what, it felt, was Murray's 'propaganda campaign' on strip searching.<sup>62</sup> The British government believed the priests to be politically, rather than spiritually, motivated. Yet, the government knew it could not openly condemn Murray for fear of offending the Catholic bishops, a delicate balance indeed. In a memo to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Prior's private secretary, Brian Palmer, highlighted that in Murray's recent pamphlet, the priest alleged that prison officers conducted a strip search on a three-year-old child and a pregnant mother during a prison visit. Murray distributed this information to church and political figures in Britain and the USA. Palmer wrote that Lord Gowrie, then Minister

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<sup>60</sup> CTOMLA, Fr Faul Papers 1983-84, Joseph Montgomery to Faul, 22 Sep. 1983.

<sup>61</sup> 'Priests warn of strip search mental illness', *Irish News*, 14 April 1983.

<sup>62</sup> The National Archives (TNA), FCO 87-1576, 'Prisons - Father Raymond Murray - Roman Catholic Chaplain at HMP Armagh' memo by Brian Palmer, Jan. 1983.

of State for Northern Ireland, had publicly denied both allegations but because of Murray's 'lies and distortions', the Provisional IRA made threats on the life of the Governor.<sup>63</sup> However, Palmer accepted that despite Murray's actions, for wider political reasons he could not be dismissed as prison chaplain. Murray clearly irritated British government officials, but his dismissal could have led to wider social and political consequences. Palmer argued that the 'prospective closure of Armagh', meant no 'recommendation to terminate Father Murray's appointment' was made to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, then Nicholas Scott.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the British government considered individual, outspoken priests a threat to their public image and safety. By January 1985, Murray amounted the practice as tantamount to 'emotional blackmail'.<sup>65</sup> Statements such as this may have been some the reasons that Murray was not asked to take on the role of prison chaplain when the British government closed Armagh and moved female prisoners to Maghaberry in March 1986. The closure of Armagh was a delicate way for the British government to remove Murray and his perceived political stance on the issue of strip searching without offending his local bishop or the Church more broadly.

After the introduction of strip searching to Armagh in 1982, some MPs addressed the issue in the House of Commons, prompting religious actors to privately petition MPs for their support. A report disclosed that between 1982 and 1985, prison officers strip searched female prisoners in Armagh thirty times each. They were searched before and after visits and court appearances, but also randomly after a claim was made in the House of Commons that guards found two keys in possession of the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> 'Strip searching 'emotional blackmail'', *Irish News*, 29 Jan. 1985.

one of the prisoners.<sup>66</sup> After the release of the report in late 1985 Neil Kinnock, Labour MP for Islwyn, in his support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, lamented that the ‘inability to find a political solution’ to Northern Ireland ‘disfigure[d] the democracy of our entire nation’ by introducing such divisive policies as ‘Courts without juries, strip searches in prisons, [and] internment without trial’.<sup>67</sup> A few weeks later, Kevin McNamara, Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull North, asked the Secretary of State in Northern Ireland, Nicholas Scott, if there were ‘any plans to change the strip-searching regime’ to which Scott replied the Whitaker committee suggested there were no ‘acceptable alternative means’ to prevent prisoner contraband.<sup>68</sup> Fr McVeigh recounted that Scott was ‘particularly harsh’ in his position on strip searching ‘and would not listen to any appeal’.<sup>69</sup> As the issue continued to be discussed in parliament, some religious sisters began to petition MPs. Sr Terence Rodgers wrote to and supplied Greville Janner with statistics, appealing to him to end the practice.<sup>70</sup> Rodgers targeted Janner for his well-known attempts to foster good relationships between people of different faith backgrounds, believing the MP could become invested in this cause. Despite petitioning high profile British government officials, the religious sisters’ words and actions did not end the practice. However, repeated petitions by religious actors had some impact. In a 1989 House of Commons debate Mo Mowlam, Labour MP for Redcar and the Labour spokesperson on Northern Ireland, cited the organisations A Christian Response to Strip Searching, supported by Irish Catholic priests Deane and

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<sup>66</sup> Sarah Clarke, *No Faith in the System: A Search for Justice* (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1995), 195.

<sup>67</sup> House of Commons Debate, 26 Nov. 1985, Neil Kinnock, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1985-11-26/debates/4815aeac-bb42-4ca2-9d9b-2230fd69f610/Anglo-IrishAgreement?highlight=strip%20search%20armagh#contribution-6eb6a936-bcab-4d50-a0a3-12b700ddeb2>

<sup>68</sup> House of Commons Debate, 12 Dec. 1985, vol 88 c1058, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1985/dec/12/armagh-prison-strip-searches>

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Fr Joe McVeigh, 31 May 2017.

<sup>70</sup> CTOMLA, Fr Faul Papers 1985-86, Sr Terence Rodgers to Greville Janner, 26 June 1985.

McKeown, as well as the Student Christian Movement of Ireland among secular groups who called for strip searching to be ‘abandoned or changed’.<sup>71</sup> The persistence of some religious sisters and priests as well as concerned Christians began to be felt in the political chambers of power.

Some of the Catholic bishops became involved to end strip searching at Armagh as well, however much more privately than clergy activists. In February 1982, Cardinal Basil Hume, the head of the English and Welsh Catholic Church, wrote to Lord Gowrie of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) with his enquiries about prison conditions. Gowrie replied in hopes of lessening Hume’s fears, that in the future at the prison more of a ‘rub down’ procedure would occur and strip searching used on prisoners only as a last resort.<sup>72</sup> In a note to the NIO in March 1983 Bishop Daly of Derry expressed his concern ‘about the situation in Armagh prison’, which he felt worsened.<sup>73</sup> A NIO spokesperson described Cardinal Ó Fiaich’s April 1983 visit to the prison as ‘purely pastoral’.<sup>74</sup> The visit came after the cardinal signed the Help the Prisoners Committee statement, which called for a discontinuation of strip searching in the prison. During his time at the prison, Ó Fiaich spoke with several inmates and officials.<sup>75</sup> At the Episcopal Commission for Emigrants at the Congress of Irish Chaplains in Britain in April 1984, Ó Fiaich acknowledged that while the practiced still occurred, it was on a ‘limited scale’.<sup>76</sup> Ó Fiaich hoped it would be the beginning of the end of strip searching.<sup>77</sup> Yet at the same time, more conservative members of the hierarchy, like Bishop Cahal Daly of

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<sup>71</sup> House of Commons Debate, 30 Jan. 1989, Mo Mowlam,

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm198889/cmhansrd/1989-01-30/Debate-7.html>

<sup>72</sup> Archives of the Archdioceses of Westminster, E5608, Lord Gowrie to Hume, 18 March 1983.

<sup>73</sup> CTOMLA, Fr Faul Papers 1983-84, Bishop Edward Daly to Faul, 10 March 1983.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Cardinal’s hush-hush prison visit’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 April 1983.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Cardinal in jail visit’, *Evening Press*, 5 April 1983.

<sup>76</sup> Derry Diocesan Archives, Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich address at the Congress of Irish Chaplains in Britain, 26 April 1984.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Cardinal condemns supergrasses- the jailing of the ‘innocents’’, *Cork Examiner*, 27 April 1984; ‘Primate renews prisoners appeal’, *Irish Times*, 27 April 1984.

Down and Connor, argued in 1984 that ‘when it [was] judged absolutely necessary strip searching must be done with the utmost sensitivity.’<sup>78</sup> While some Catholic bishops privately communicated their concerns over the practice to the British government and, on occasion, publicly commented on the issue, others saw it as a necessary evil.

Members of the clergy attempted to persuade less vocal English and Irish Catholic bishops and archbishops to speak out against strip searching. Fr Joe McVeigh wrote to Archbishop Derek Worlock of Liverpool when he discovered the archbishop was travelling to Northern Ireland. In his letter, McVeigh included a *Guth An Phobail* pamphlet in which former female prisoners described their experiences. McVeigh hoped Worlock’s visit would ‘contribute to a just and lasting peace’.<sup>79</sup> Worlock responded, clarifying that himself and the Anglican bishop, Derek Sheppard, came at the invitation of Cardinal Ó Fiaich but asked McVeigh for his ‘prayers and understanding’.<sup>80</sup> Sheppard and Worlock did not publicly discuss strip searching before, during, or after their visit to Northern Ireland. While the English bishops regularly commented on the conflict, especially when it impacted their community in the form of republican bombings and attacks in England,<sup>81</sup> for some remarking on this issue may have been perceived as supporting republican propaganda efforts.

Catholic clergy and hierarchy responses against strip searching of female prisoners took on a transnational dimension. In October 1984, a group of American bishops journeyed to Northern Ireland on a fact-finding mission to understand the problem of strip searching and meet with female prisoners. Four bishops, led by the

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Christian Study: A Community Problem’, *A Christian Response to Strip Searching* (Belfast: Christian Response to Strip Search Group, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> Liverpool Archdiocesan Archive (LAA), WOR 13/8/2, Fr Joe McVeigh to Archbishop Derek Worlock, Jan. 1984.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, Archbishop Derek Worlock to Fr Joe McVeigh, 18 Jan. 1984.

<sup>81</sup> Margaret M. Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968-98* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

president of the National Conference of Catholic bishops, Bishop James Malone of Youngstown, Ohio travelled to Armagh. Ó Fiaich welcomed the group and Fr Murray accompanied them to the prison. The bishops discussed with several of the female prisoners long-term sentencing as well as strip searching.<sup>82</sup> After their four-day visit, the bishops spoke out that they were ‘gravely concerned’ over ‘charges of abuse in strip searching’.<sup>83</sup> The *Boston Irish Echo* believed the bishops’ statement would ‘intensify the focus of attention’ in the USA ‘on the situation in Northern Ireland’.<sup>84</sup> However, their visit proved fruitless and the practice continued, demonstrating the American bishops’ lacked influence over the British government.

Strip searching not only affected Irish prisoners and their families in the North. The practice also occurred for women in English prisons. In her memoir, Sr Sarah Clarke recounted the story of one prisoner’s wife who, after visiting her husband in Brixton prison, was picked up by security forces on her way to the airport. The woman was strip searched multiple times, released 48 hours later and told by police to never discuss what happened to her. Clarke described the woman’s experience as ‘tantamount to rape by the Establishment’ when she hoped to raise awareness of the issue to her religious and political contacts.<sup>85</sup> In HMP Brixton, Martina Anderson and Ella O’Dwyer wrote to Clarke that they had been strip searched ‘hundreds of times’ by November 1985.<sup>86</sup> A campaigner for the rights of Irish republican prisoners in English based prisons, the British Home Office refused to allow Clarke visits to ‘Category A’

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<sup>82</sup> ‘US Bishops on fact-finding tour meet jail women’, *Irish News*, 22 Oct. 1984.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Concern by US bishops on North’, *Irish Press*, 26 Oct. 1984.

<sup>84</sup> ‘The Bishops’ statement’, *Boston Irish Echo*, 10 Nov. 1984.

<sup>85</sup> Clarke, *No Faith in the System*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

prisoners.<sup>87</sup> By involving Clarke, Anderson and O'Dwyer hoped their experience would reach a wider audience.

The message of campaigning Irish priests like Faul and Murray reached the American Catholic clergy. One Catholic religious sister bucked the trend of many American clergy members remaining silent on the conflict by attempting to draw attention to the strip searching of female prisoners. Sr Patrice Lucas, of Chicago, corresponded with Fr Denis Faul,<sup>88</sup> who told her 'that women religious could do much to bring this immoral and degrading treatment of women to an end'.<sup>89</sup> Lucas wrote to Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago to ask for his help in making 'an appeal to the women religious of our country' to write a 'corporate statement' against strip searching.<sup>90</sup> Lucas also reached out to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the National Assembly of Religious Women, and the National Coalition of American Nuns asking for their assistance. Bernadin shared the religious sister's concerns and 'took the liberty' of sharing her information with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB).<sup>91</sup> It remains unclear from the available archival documents whether Lucas received a response, but the NCCB released no official statement critical of strip searching. Despite the four American bishops' concern during their 1984 visit, the United States Catholic Conference and NCCB archives, as well as those of the Archbishops of Boston and Chicago, reveal that Lucas was in the minority.

Media coverage of the strip searching lessened after Armagh closed in March 1986 and its female prisoners moved to Maghaberry prison. Yet in a homily Fr Joe

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<sup>87</sup> Scull, *Catholic Church*, 129.

<sup>88</sup> CTOMLA, Fr Faul Papers 1983-84, Sr Patrice Lucas to Fr Denis Faul, 14 Sep. 1983.

<sup>89</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago, MS\_Replre&UlsterFunding45375.03, Sr Patrice Lucas to Cardinal Joseph Bernadin, 15 Aug. 1986.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, Sr Patrice Lucas to Cardinal Joseph Bernadin, 15 Aug. 1986.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, Cardinal Bernadin to Sr Patrice Lucas, 29 Aug. 1986.



McVeigh warned that strip searching became ‘even more vicious’ at Maghaberry.<sup>92</sup> McVeigh, the chairman of the Fermanagh Anti-strip Search Committee, was called to a meeting about a petition to Pope John Paul II from 24 priests, asking the Holy Father to publicly condemn the practice.<sup>93</sup> In an interview McVeigh revealed he believed the British government increased strip searching of female prisoners not for security reasons but to ‘demoralise and degrade’ the women ‘especially’ because it was ‘so degrading for women’ specifically.<sup>94</sup> The repeated exposure and denunciation of the practice by the clergy and the bishops influenced public opinion, hurting the image of the British government, and leading to an eventual reduction in the number of prisoners strip searched. The British government clearly worried about the damaging effect of priests’, religious sisters’, and bishops’ words. Where British government officials could dismiss the actions of a few ‘radical’ priests has hateful or spurred on by pro-nationalist sympathies, they wrote individually to bishops to ease their concerns. Therefore, the status of the individual, whether clergy or hierarchy, distinguished how the British government reacted to each individual’s outspoken views on strip searching. Further, the highly emotive practice and its focus on female prisoners and visitors possibly galvanised the public into protest more so than if they were male prisoners. The combination of strip searching as an invasive and emotionally damaging with the priests’ and bishops’ highly successful programme to publicise the issue worked two-fold to decrease this procedure.

## Conclusion

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<sup>92</sup> Joe McVeigh, *Crying out for Justice: A Collection of Talks and Writings* (Fermanagh: Lurg Publications, 1997), 40-47.

<sup>93</sup> ‘RC Curate has become involved in controversial issues’, *Impartial Reporter NT*, 10 Jan. 1985.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Fr Joe McVeigh, 31 May 2017.

The power that sexual violence holds as a deliberate and strategic weapon of war is both epitomised and furthered by the silence and recoiling away from the subject, leaving those who experienced such violence to cope on their own with little support or even recognition from the community.<sup>95</sup> While it is of course important to foreground the agency and resistance of republican women alongside the deleterious effects of gender-based violence, nevertheless, it is clear from this research and others, that women suffer the initial assaults but also often endure decades of stigma and shame.<sup>96</sup> As Northern Ireland continues to wrestle with its multiple and often vexed processes of truth recovery and justice under the auspices of ‘dealing with the past’, experiences of strip searching and other forms of SGBV by state forces represent layers of harm and loss that are frequently positioned outside the prevailing orthodox understandings of what constitutes conflict-related harms. Strip searching therefore remains relatively unrecognised, stigmatised, and unresolved. The wall of silence that typically bounds narratives and stories of sexual violence ensures that the full extent is often unknown. This article, therefore, plays a modest but nevertheless important part in those ongoing endeavours to bring to light the myriad forms of sexual violence against women in the ‘Troubles’, collating important insights from republican women and the Catholic Church into a practice that they considered a form of sexual violence and a human rights violation. Although our research was concerned with the period between 1982 and 1992, the practice continued throughout the remainder of the conflict, through the 1998 peace accord and remains in place today where ‘dissenter republicans’, who disagree with the peace process, remain subjected to sporadic episodes of strip searching. Despite the impressive body of research over the last ten years documenting

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<sup>95</sup> O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity*, 50.

<sup>96</sup> Megan MacKenzie, ‘Securitizing sex? Towards a theory of the utility of wartime sexual violence,’ *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12 (2007): 202–221.

SGBV during the conflict in Northern Ireland, there remains a pressing need for further, wide-ranging research documenting both the extent and formations of SGBV during the conflict but also to explore the needs and interests of victims and survivors with regards to recognising and redressing the many harms inflicted.

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