

Women Imprisoned as a Result of the Struggle

by *Philomena Gallagher*

L'auteure enquête sur les conditions de détention et les violations que les prisonnières politiques ont subies dans

les prisons de l'Irlande du Nord en 1976 et surtout sur les implications des fouilles faites sur elles par des gardiens masculins.

All women prisoners, women menstruating, pregnant women, and grandmothers were strip-searched.

Armagh Jail was built in 1790. It was a sinister and austere building which became in the 1970s a formidable top-security prison. Nationalist women were imprisoned there from 1971. By 1976 there were 236 women held in Armagh Jail as convicted prisoners or internees. There was no political status at first but the women quickly gained this tacit recognition from the prison authorities. Political status meant that prison conditions were at least bearable. This situation was to change from mid-1975 when the British government attempted to criminalize the republican prisoners. Anyone sentenced for a political offense from March 1st, 1976 was thus denied political status.

The men in the H-Blocks at Long Kesh Jail commenced a blanket protest (wearing nothing but a blanket) against the withdrawal of political status. In February 1977, five women engaged in a "No Work Protest" in Armagh Jail. This number rose to 38 by March 1979. During this time the women were locked up 21 hours a day, with the loss of privileges and remission, and with visiting reduced to one visit per month (Carroll).¹

In May 1978, the women in Armagh Women's Prison suffered an unprovoked baton charge by male prison warders (guards) (McCorley). This attack left several women in-

jured. There was another unprovoked attack in February 1980 (McCorley). Male and female warders attacked the women while they were queuing up for lunch. These attacks forced the women on to a "No Wash Protest" in February 1980. The women were locked in their cells, and unable to slop-out, were forced to empty their urine under their cell doors and dispose of their excreta and menstrual blood by daubing cell walls with it (Sinn Fein, "Stop Strip-Searching").

These same women in Armagh Jail joined the first "Hunger Strike" started by the men in late October 1980 and only ended their protest when it was believed by the prisoners that a satisfactory settlement had been reached. The British government reneged on the agreement and, as a result, ten men died on hunger strike in 1981. The "No Wash" protest ended on the day the second hunger strike began on March 1st, 1981.

In 1982 the new prisoner governor (warden), Thomas Murtagh introduced an even harsher regime which favoured strip-searching. He claimed that strip-searching needed to be introduced because young juveniles had smuggled in keys belonging to a magistrate's car on their return from a court appearance. The keys had not been found during the body frisk on their return and more thorough searches were needed. The young juveniles told volunteer, Mairead Farrell, that they brought the keys in for a prank and that they had handed them over when the prison staff had not detected them on their return (Sinn Fein, "Stop Strip-Searching in Armagh Jail").

All women prisoners from the age of 15 years, women menstruating, pregnant women, women returning to prison after hospital visits, and grandmothers were subjected to strip-searching. At first the prisoners re-

fused to comply and were forcibly restrained while their clothing was torn off. The women quickly learned that any resistance meant that they would be forcibly stripped, assaulted, and that they could end up in solitary confinement, losing remission and privileges. Strip-searching mainly affected "remand" prisoners—those still waiting to be heard in court—who, under the questionable proceedings of the Diplock Courts, can be held in custody for two years or more before their case is brought to trial.

Strip-searching is a devastating psychological weapon used against women. Linda Quigly, a former prisoner said, "There must be some similarity between what we feel and what a rape victim feels, our bodies are being violated" (Sinn Fein, "Stop Strip-Searching").

During a strip-search the prisoner is told to remove all her clothes and hand them to the warders. Each item is thoroughly examined and its colour and size noted in a book. Women who are menstruating are ordered to hand over their sanitary towels or tampons for inspection and are given fresh sanitary protection. On occasions, women who have been embarrassed to remove their pants because they have their periods have had them forcibly removed against their will. Cynical comments are made about their clothing and their bodies. Pregnant women and women who have stretch marks on their bodies have been jibed at.

The women are usually scrutinized from top to bottom, then ordered to turn around while their backs are examined by the warders who run their fingers through their hair. The palms of their hands are inspected as are the soles of their feet. After the search the women are given back their clothes and if they refuse to get dressed in front of the security forces, they are forcibly dressed. The prison

authorities stress that strip-searching is carried out for security reasons and if the prisoners conform to prison rules there will be no need to forcibly strip-search anyone.

Their anal and vaginal passages can be held open and pried into with hands and fingers.

Prison officials maintain that women are not “internally” searched because no “instrument” is inserted into them during the searches. In other words, their anal and vaginal passages can be held open and pried into with hands and fingers—and that does not technically constitute “an internal” (Sinn Fein, “Stop Strip-Searching”).

Professor Ivor Browne of the Department of Psychiatry in University College Dublin argued:

Strip-searching is a rather violent procedure and a tremendous intrusion on a human being. In Irish Catholic culture where, very often, even married people don't undress in front of each other, strip-searching is experienced as especially traumatic, and is a tremendous intrusion. In Ireland, clothes are almost a part of a person's body. To invade this is a violation. It is a violent act and I think in some sense rapacious. Most people think of rape as a sexual act; in fact the more you go into studying rape the more clearly it is revealed as an act of hatred and violence and strip-searching has the connotations of this. (Sinn Fein, “Stop Strip-Searching”)

Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson were held on remand in the all-male Brixton prison between July 1st, 1985 and September 30th, 1986. By the time their case came to

trial, both women were strip-searched 400 times each. Ella stated that:

I had to stand naked while they checked my clothes. Prison officers rub my hair and ears like an animal. I have to lift my feet so they can inspect them too. The awful dread is that I will be touched so I am stiffened to resist. They have told me that they can lift my breasts forcibly if they decide and even probe my body folds. They can touch any part of me. Strip-searching is an experiment in control methods in prison and is especially directed at women. It is a form of psychological rape. I doubt that it is a lack of confidence in their technology that provokes them to strip-search us. The place is littered with cameras and a metal detector or one of their many “sniffer” dogs would successfully replace strip-searching as a security measure.

On March 18th, 1986 the women prisoners from Armagh were moved to a new top-security prison at Maghaberry about twelve-and-a-half miles from Belfast. This new prison, considered to be one of the most secure in the world cost £30 million. An extra £5 million was spent on security measures, yet strip-searching continued. In the first six months in Maghaberry a total of 210 strip-searches were carried out (Sinn Fein, “Stop Strip-Searching”). The prison governor also introduced a system of random strip-searching which caused the women considerable increased stress since they could not predict when they might be strip-searched.

All the women regarded strip-searching as a violation of their privacy, a way of attacking women, in particular, because of their sexuality. The “Women Against Strip-Searches Group” stressed:

This reflects the use of sexual violence in the broader society where it is used to dominate women as a group. The intended effect is to generate fear and to prevent women from controlling their own lives. (Sinn Fein, “Stop Strip-Searching in Armagh Jail”)

The “Stop the Strip-Searches Campaign” began in June 1984. It called for an end to the strip-searching of women prisoners and condemned strip-searching as having no security purpose. By 1992, it had been reported that over 4,000 strip-searches had been carried out on women in prisons in Northern Ireland and England and that nothing had ever been found to threaten security. The only items which the authorities claim to have discovered on the women prisoners was a £5 note and a small phial of perfume (Sinn Fein, “Stop Strip-Searching in Armagh Jail”).

After reading an article on strip-searching in 1992, I based the following poem on the experiences of a young woman from Co. Tyrone who was forcibly strip-searched. Pauline

“Strip-searching is an experiment in control methods in prison. It is a form of psychological rape.”

Quinn's brother was murdered so naturally she was in a very emotional state. A few weeks later her grandfather died. She was not granted a compassionate visit with her family until many weeks after his death, and when she returned to prison she was ordered to reception and ordered to strip. She refused to do so (McCormley).

Strip searching—brutality.
Strip searching—sexual harassment.
Strip searching—soul searing.

A few hours compassionate leave,
My heart heavy with grief.
I'm alone with eight warders.
I struggle, I resist, insist have
nothing to hide
Not again, please no more.
They invade my body and soul.
My own sex prepares to degrade
me.

My torture begins.
Forcibly stripped, determinedly
held down.
My legs spread wide apart, I'm
menstruating.
My inner most private parts and
bodily function bared.
Oh God help me. Somebody
help me.
My mind screams in vain.
Their jeering remarks about my
body burn into my soul.
Their rough probing ignorant
fingers molest my innocent
vagina.

Sixteen hands hold me strong,
Humiliation, shame seeps
through every pore of my
body.
Can one die of degradation? I
die.
My assailants turn me face down!
"Search the whore!" verbally
raped.
The same rough ignorant hands
probe gleefully and brutally
my anus.
"The cunt has nothing."

Sixteen hands release me,
I crawl, battered, bruised, men-
tally and physically, to my cell.
Their fingerprints burned my
skin,
Left their imprint on my soul.
I feel unclean, want to scrub
away all evidence of this inva-
sion.
I'm left alone with my daytime
nightmares of strip-searching.
No Rape Crisis Centre for me.
(Gallagher, "Strip-Searching")

Jacqueline Moore from Derry, a
remand prisoner in Armagh who gave
birth to a baby girl in June 1984, was
subjected to a traumatic strip-search
on July 24th, 1984, when going to
court on a remand appearance. The
prison authorities were well aware
that she was still bleeding from the
vagina and leaking milk from her
breasts, thus requiring sanitary and
breast protection, yet they insisted
that she comply with a full strip-
search. Jacqueline stated that:

*Despite my medical condition, I
was strip-searched. Once naked I
attempted to cover my breasts with
my arms as I was embarrassed
with my breasts leaking milk. I
was ordered to remove them to
facilitate the warders inspection of
my naked body.* (Sinn Fein, "Stop
Strip-Searching")

Women's natural bodily functions
like menstruation and pregnancy are
used against them to cause more stress
and hardship. Under prison rules,
prisoners may keep their child until it
is one year old. Searches occurred
even when Jacqueline took the child
in its pram from the wing to the
exercise yard or when she took the
baby with her to the visitors' area.
The child's clothing was not removed
but the baby was also searched.
Jacqueline was denied baby rice
(pablum) to supplement the child's
bottle-feed and nappies (diapers) were
issued under strict control. The au-
thorities refused to leave a supply in
Jacqueline's cell where she could have
access as required. Jacqueline's mother
was also in prison and they once
shared a cell. The authorities sepa-
rated them and refused a request to
allow Jacqueline's mother to take care
of the baby at least one night a week,
to allow for Jacqueline's recovery.
The prison authorities will state that
this was a security measure. The re-
publican prisoners will argue that it
was simply an exercise to break their
spirit.

The republican prisoners wrote to
several newspapers to highlight their
plight. Their statements never ap-

peared in any of the papers, giving the
impression that women prisoners
never complained about strip-search-
ing. The following poignantly bitter
poem expresses the feelings of the
prisoners. It was smuggled out of
Armagh Jail in 1984.

Can you give me a truthful an-
swer
Can you unashamedly say
Strip-searching is not de-grad-
ing
'Cause it's done in a sensitive
way.

I think not Mr Murtagh
Because you haven't a clue
of the mental stress and anguish
Your woman victims go through.

The humiliation and embarrass-
ment
How can you ever claim to know
The inner feelings of a woman
When her body's put on show?

Our bodies are grossly violated
And inspected part by part
Can you be so insensitive
Perhaps you lack a heart.

When women have a period
Even when they are pregnant
too
You continue to abuse them
Isn't this true?
Even sanitary protection must
be removed
Sometimes this happens with
force
But you and your lackeys in the
N.I.O.
Will claim, It's sensitively done
of course!

Your lies are plain and open
For all the world to see,
You can't fool anyone
Least of all me!
(Anon.)

In 1992 the female prisoners in
Maghaberry experienced a horrific
forced cell and strip-search. On Mon-
day, March 2nd, at 8:20 a.m., the
women were told that they would not

be unlocked because a search of the jail was being conducted. At about 8:30 a.m. male screws (prison officers) walked through the wings singing "Happy Days Are Here Again." An hour later the women were told that they would each be subjected to a strip-search. If they did not comply that would be put on "report" and "punished." The women refused.

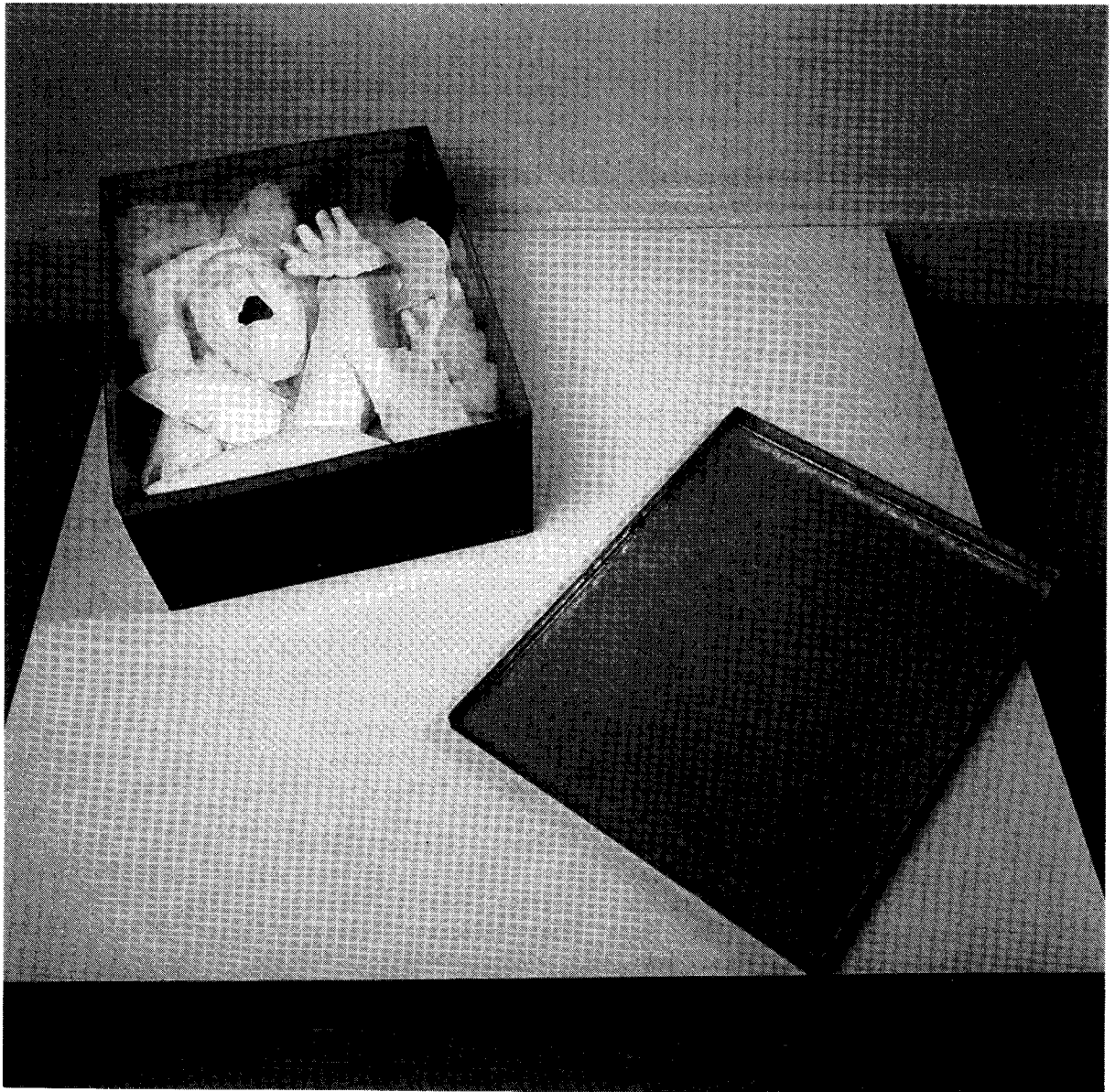
Within an hour large numbers of female screws dressed in full riot gear entered the wings carrying shields and batons. Before long the sound of screaming was heard throughout the jail as one woman

was set upon by six of the riot squad, dragged down onto the floor of her cell and forcibly stripped naked. (Carroll)

Frightened and confused women began to barricade their doors (using bed and locker) in an attempt to prevent experiencing the same treatment. The male search team and dog handlers outside the windows laughed and cheered at the sound of the women's screams, watching as women were dragged off the bars of the windows. Cell doors were left wide open so that the male and female searchers on the landing outside could watch if they

wished. Twenty-one female republican prisoners experienced this attack (Carroll).

Female screws in full riot gear would burst into the cell, seize hold the women's arms and legs, and drag her down pushing her face tightly into the floor. Women's mouths were covered in an attempt to stifle screams. Some women's arms were twisted up their backs, others were pinned to the floor above their heads. All the women sustained injuries of some description while being forcibly stripped naked. (McCorley)



Marion Keogh, "Half A Whole Person," Family Resource Centre, mixed media, 122 x 122 cm.
(From *Unspoken Truths*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1996). Photo: John Kellett

In the case of one prisoner, Roseleen McCorley, screws stripped her from the waist down and began shouting, "on your knees prisoner." Once stripped naked, some of the screws forced the woman's clothing back on again while still holding her down. Others left their victims lying naked or half-naked on the floor.

The whole atmosphere during the day was set out to strike the maximum terror into the women prisoners. Screws were all psyched up, some of them seemed crazy, roaring and shouting at the top of their voices. Many laughed and joked on the landing; some stood gloating at open cell doors as they watched women being stripped naked. Male screws on the landings mimicked the screams of the women prisoners; the male search teams outside the windows shouted crude remarks in at the women, held up their middle finger, and stuck out and wiggled their tongues. (Carroll)

Geraldine Ferrity and Brownyn McGahan, who shared a cell, barricaded themselves in so strongly that male screws in full riot gear were required to force an entry. When they gained access to the cell, they did not wait for the female screws but grabbed Geraldine off the top bunk and let her fall head first onto the floor. Four others pinned Brownyn to the floor and while she lay helpless and screaming, one of them rubbed his hand over the lower half of her body, violently squeezing her bottom. They twisted her limbs in various directions and carried her to another wing to be forcibly stripped by female screws. Brownyn said that the guards were permitted to watch from windows in the wings and they broke into choruses of "Happy Days Are Here Again," when the women's genitals were "searched" (Carroll).

The entire search operation began early that morning and continued through to 9:00 p.m. that night. At no time were the women permitted to leave their cells for any reason.

Women nursing young children were also confined to cells at all times. The same screws handed meals twice to the women but they were too shocked and sickened to eat anything (Carroll).

At one point the number one governor (the most senior governor in Maghaberry) toured the wings and spoke with his staff. He made no attempt however to speak to any of the prisoners and offered no explanation for the forcible strip-searches which he had ordered. It was noticed that all the searches stopped when this governor was present on the wings and began after he left. (Carroll)

One aspect which cannot be recorded is the psychological effect the strip-searches have had on the women. Such violent treatment violates Article 5 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and contravenes the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners as well as Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Not only do these women have to come to terms with being brutally strip-searched and assaulted, but must live in fear of a repeat attack. It is interesting to note that male Irish Republic Army (IRA) prisoners are never expected to strip completely naked for the purpose of a search. Strip-searching is reserved for women only.

The IRA men in Maghaberry Prison, with the exception of the men transferred from prisons in England, have given up their political affiliation and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) cannot bear the fact that the republican women refuse to do the same:

The more the men in Maghaberry are entertained the more the women are marginalized. We have already been told that as we are a politically cohesive group structured along "paramilitary lines," we will not have the same facilities afforded us. We do not believe that anyone should have to change their political ideology in order to live in a safe and humane environ-

ment... As women in an all-male environment we constantly find ourselves having to assert ourselves and pursue humane conditions. (McArdle)

Over a period of time, censorship has greatly increased with all items of a political and feminist content subject to special consideration. There are often long delays, a year or more, before a decision is made on whether literature is allowed or forbidden. However, pornographic magazines flow unhindered through the censors to some male prisoners. Apparently the NIO objects to politicized women while approving of and even encouraging the subordination and degradation of women through pornography and strip-searching.

Philomena Gallagher received her M.A. in Women's Studies from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1995. In addition to co-ordinating and tutoring four creative writing workshops, she is also Cross-Community/Community Development Officer for the "Edgarobins Project" in Portadown, Northern Ireland.

¹The personal interviews cited in this article were conducted as part of the research for my MA thesis, "An Oral History of the Imprisoned Female Irish Republican Army." After a hard struggle, I received permission to interview eight female IRA prisoners, who told their story for the first time.

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