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Gender Trouble(s) **: Women Expressing Agency in their Everyday Lives during the Northern Irish Troubles (1969-1998).**

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ABSTRACT :

The violence of the Troubles has caused intense and diverse reactions from women across the political divide. While some women have made a valuable contribution to the reduction of violence in the region by stepping into the public domain and cutting across community lines, others have reacted to violence by actively resisting it in gendered ways. Some women have also directly participated in the conflict by means of physical violence and protests. This paper examines the wide range of women's expressions of agency during the conflict. If anything, these differences show the extent to which women's experiences of and responses to armed violence are inextricably linked to issues of class, ethno-cultural belongings, political persuasions, and sexuality. It appears reasonable, in addition, to suggest that conflict opens up new spaces where women are able to transgress conservative norms and question their own relationship to political activity.

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INTRODUCTION :

Despite the extensive body of work about women in Northern Ireland[1], very little has been written about women's everyday agency and resistance during the Troubles. Much of the scholarly literature on conflict has paid little attention to the way in which gender shapes individuals' experiences of and responses to political violence – and how those experiences, in turn, affect women's socio-political awareness. It is clear, however, that women in Northern Ireland have become increasingly politically conscious and have organised in efforts to respond to the violence and sectarianism of the Troubles. In this paper, I will critically assess the extent to which women were able to express agency and resistance in their everyday lives during the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1969-1998). This will allow me to analyse the impact of civil conflict upon women's individual and collective agency, in the context of a highly conservative and deeply sectarian society like that of Northern Ireland. Indeed, as Edgerton (1986) has argued, striving for physical and psychological survival in arduous conditions is not the most conducive setting for expressing agency and raising individual and collective political consciousness. Moreover, women in Northern Ireland have been heavily socialised into rigid gender norms by the Churches, education systems and ideological paradigms of their communities – so much so that Irish political leader James Connolly has called the Northern Irish woman the « slave of a slave » (Connolly 1981), in reference to the Irish man's position as a 'slave' of the British coloniser. Notwithstanding, women from across the spectrum of ideological beliefs have been transgressing the boundaries of gender to create new spaces for expressing themselves, finding a community and campaigning against political violence in the North of Ireland.

The study of women's resistance therefore allows for more dynamic understandings of women's daily experiences of conflict in Northern Ireland. It highlights the intersection between gender oppression and political action – particularly in light of Foucault's idea that power and resistance are 'everywhere' (1975) and that power relations are found in the everyday lives of all that reside in a state. Studying resistance as a tool for understanding women's responses to conflict moves us away from the traditional and pervasive imagery of women as passive victims of armed violence and creates a framework for examining women's rationality and purpose in a state of political violence (Green et al. 1993 and Stanko

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[1] For an overview, see : Byrne and Leonard, 1997 (in bibliography)

1990). It also breaks down the outdated dichotomy of victim/agent in conflict studies. Furthermore, the dismantling of existing socio-political patterns that occurs in conflicting societies heightens the tension between tradition and modernity, conservatism and progressivism.

My analysis will consist in examining women's agency through their resistance to, manipulation, and rejection of state and non-state violence. This paper draws support from a wide range of sources – it is a critical analysis deriving from a comparative study of secondary sources (scholarly works, articles, publications, statistics and books) as well as primary sources (oral and written testimonies from women involved in the conflict, right across the spectrum of religious/political/ethno-national and cultural beliefs). In the introduction to this paper I try to briefly contextualise the Troubles, as well as the current state of academic literature on the topic, after having defined some key terms used throughout the paper. I will then begin the substantial part of my analysis by looking at ways in which women have resisted different aspects of institutionalised State violence in the North. Secondly, I will assess women's manipulation of violence as a means of expressing agency against the backdrop of the traditionally male space of physical political violence. The third part of this paper will consist in an analysis of women's efforts to cross the deeply sectarian lines that shaped Northern Irish society during the Troubles.

Disclaimer : Avoiding the trap(s)

To write about 'women in Northern Ireland' as if they were a homogeneous group would be unviable. Women across the region testify to a hugely diverse range of backgrounds, abilities and experiences. As Cornell (1991, p.3) warns :

> *« If there is to be feminism at all, we must rely on a feminine « voice » and a feminine « reality » that can be identified as such and correlated with the lives of actual women ; and yet at the same time all accounts of the feminine seem to reset the trap of rigid gender identities, deny the real differences between women and reflect the history of oppression and discrimination rather than an ideal or an ethical positioning to the other to which we can aspire »*

While I agree with Cornell's viewpoint, I also think that narratives of experience can provide critical entrypoints into the history of how personal and social identities came to be, and how they have been shaped by power relations. In this paper, I will attempt (indeed strive) to avoid generalisations and oversimplification of women's experiences and attitudes during the Troubles. My goal is not to provide an exhaustive account of said experiences, but to provide some answers surrounding the potential of ethno-political conflict in fostering women's agency at different levels of their personal lives.

The lack of interest in women's voices and concerns in studies about the Troubles calls for attempts to present the range of women's own responses during the conflict. Typical portrayals of women in conflicting societies present them as more conciliatory and moderate than men. Depictions of Northern Irish women as « peacemakers » regrettably erase a large portion of women's experiences, beliefs and action during the conflict – particularly as more evidence from similar contexts such as that of the Arab/Israeli conflict, the former Yugaslavia, and South Africa highlights the complexity of women's responses to violence and sectarianism during ethnic and religous conflict (Morgan and Fraser 1994).

At the same time, women are commonly held responsible for maintaining the traditional values in their community (Morgan 1995)- and, as such, are frequently relegated to their roles as daughters, mothers and wives. Women's position in Northern Ireland is deeply embedded in religious and national identities (Morgan and Fraser 1994). Pope John Paul II's appeal to Irish women to seek their « vocation of giving life and caring for this life as a mother » in Limerick in 1979 (McWilliams 1991) illustrates the kind of religious conservatism that is deeply antagonistic to changes in gender oppression in Northern Ireland. Women – particularly on the Catholic/Republican side of the divide - have been simultaneously erased from the the political realm and idealised through the popular submissive and long-suffering figure of Mary, the 'Virgin Mother', 'Queen of Ireland', who has been portrayed as a symbol against British colonialism. The use of such discourse partially explains the limits and uproar caused by women's active participation in resistance during the conflict. Women, seen as metaphors of the private sphere in symbolic epistemologies of the Nation, are restricted to their motherly destiny through the 'true' Catholic womanhood created by the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, Republicanism participated in the oppression of the (Northern) Irish woman by endowing her with the genealogy of republican revolutionaries (Earles 2009).

Within this context, therefore, women's responses to violence and sectarianism was limited during the Troubles. However, women have also created new ways of expressing agency and resisting oppressive norms, and this from the early days of the conflict.

A (short) History of the Troubles:

In 1920 and 1921, following 120 years of British rule as part of the United Kingdom, 26 of the 32 Irish counties gained independence. The other six, northeastern counties remained a British governmental entity, dominated by a Unionist population of 'Protestant ascendancy' (Boyle, Hadden and Hillyard 1975, p.162) and militarily garrisoned by Britain from 1969 until 1998, when the Good Friday Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement) brought an end to 'the use of violence for the furtherance of political goals' (MultiParty Agreement 1998, 477).

By then, the Northern Ireland conflict, known as the 'Troubles', a conflict of status (McKittrick and McVea 2012, p.377) between pro-Irish nationalists and pro-British unionists, had killed 3,600 people and wounded over 50 000 – this in a population of around 1.5 million (Dorney 2015).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS:

Armagh : Former prison in Armagh, Northern Ireland. It held 33 Republican women prisoners from 1973 to 1975.

BA : British Army

Cumann na mBan : Junior (Irish) Republican women's paramilitary organisation.

IRA : Irish Republican Army.

Loyalist : People who took up arms to defend Northern Ireland's link to the UK. *LPOs* : Loyalist Paramilitary Organisations.

Maghaberry : Prison in Maghaberry, Northern Ireland. It held all female republican prisoners after 1986. The male prison became operational in 1987.

Nationalist : People who want independence from Britain.

NIWC : Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Cross-community political party in Northern Ireland (1996-2006).

NIWRM : Northern Ireland Women's Right Movement.

PIRA : Provisional Irish Republican Army. Irish Republican paramilitary organisation seeking the end of British rule in Northern Ireland.

POs : Paramilitary Organisations.

Republican : People campaigning for the end of British rule through violence.

Unionist : People wanting Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom.

UDA : Ulster Defence Association. Loyalist Paramilitary group.

UVF : Ulster Volunteer Force. Loyalist Paramilitary group.

Long Kesh : Prison in Maze, Northern Ireland. It housed paramilitary prisoners from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s.

WAI : Women Against Imperalism. Small group of republican and anti-imperialist women based in Belfast and Derry (1978-1981).

WSN : Women's Support Network. Regional organisation working across community-based women's centres in Northern Ireland (c.1989).

1. Women resisting state violence

In many conflicts where state and/or ethnic violence erupts brutally and with unforeseen intensity, an event, chain of events or period of time usually emerges as a pivotal moment, symbolic milestone within collective consciousness[2] (Aretxaga 1997).

In Northern Ireland, the 1969 civil rights campaign appeared as a turning point in the historico-political consciousness of nationalists and in the personal experiences of many women. For a lot of women in the North, the events of the early 1970s brought about new forms of self-discovery and political awareness (Fairweather et al. 1987, Aretxaga 1997, Pickering 2002)– which I hereafter refer to as « the learning process ». As will be examined in this chapter, this transformation of consciousness occurred when women became acquainted with the power of the State as it inserted itself into their lives in concrete forms. This new consciousness had an impact on individuals, their relationships, and concepts such as ethnicity, nationality and cultural belonging.

I. The seeds of female solidarity and gendered awareness : the 1970 curfew

In 1970, following the civil rights marches in Belfast and Derry, and the rioting that occurred after stop and search operations in the area had led to the death of a bystander. The British Army imposed a curfew on the Lower Falls, a working-class Catholic/Republican area in Belfast. The curfew began in July 1970 with 'Saracen armoured vehicles lined along the Falls Road' (*Irish Times*, July 4, 1970) and an armed force of fifteen hundred surrounding 'a population of barely ten thousand civilians' (Aretxaga 1997 p.56). Riots ensued for the following five days, and it is estimated that at least three hundred families were evacuated from their homes. Reports sent to by residents to the press also mention soldiers destroying houses, stealing property and smashing doors and windows (*Sunday Times Insight Team – STIT-* 1972). The 1970 curfew represented a milestone in many Catholic women's perception of the conflict and their role as women within Northern Irish society (Aretxaga 1997).

In particular, for many women the curtailed access to milk resulting from the curfew represented a symbolic failure to provide for the psychological and physical needs of the family (Aretxaga 1997) – qualities of care for which women are largely held responsible. On

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[2] Warren (1992) argues that this was the case with *la Violencia* in Guatemala.

July 6, around three thousand women from the Upper Falls marched down the road carrying 'shopping bags, bottles of milk and loaves of bread' (Irish News, July 6 1970) for the Lower Falls residents. Some of them carried signs saying « *BA (British Army) worse than the Black and Tans, women and child beaters* » (*Irish News*, July 6 1970). The Black and Tans - the British mercenary force deployed during the Irish War of Independence (1918-1921) – were known for their intense brutality, and have come to embody death in popular Irish folklore and history (Lowe 2004). By drawing such comparisons and calling the BA « women and child beaters », the women of the Upper Falls were using gendered stereotypes of conflict as a confrontation between the helpless and powerless (as symbolised by women) and the all-powerful force of the State. Such manipulation of stereotypical femininities highlights women's awareness of the highly gendered nature of the curfew and house raids. The army, by invading spaces that were predominantly female, and preventing women from fulfilling aspects of their roles as wives and mothers, was operating a direct attack on women themselves. Much like the popular myth of Antigone (where moral obligation to the family supersedes all, including political law), so has the curfew come to symbolise women's resistance to state brutality in reference to notions of care and motherhood (Bacik 2007). In fact, in the face of such brutal disruption to family and community life, many women felt that they « had no choice » (Aretxaga p.62) but to enter resistance. In Northern Ireland, a significant motivating factor in women's resistance and political engagement was motherhood (Edgerton 1986). Irish Catholic idealisation of motherhood (O'Dowd 1987) and the imagery of the ideal-typical mother as the Virgin Mary, have served to reinforce the Church's authority over the family, and the woman's role within it. In both Catholic and Protestant ideologies, the woman is subordinate. Her role is to emotionally and materially support her family. She is the unconditional love(r), the carer, the nurturer, the mediator. The women who marched down the Falls road in July 1970 were reacting to the inability to provide for the wellbeing of their family (Ward and McGivern 1980).

The march left many Catholic women with a newfound sense of solidarity : in February 1971, women rallied in front of the Belfast Law Courts following indiscriminate arrests of Republicans made under the Special Power Acts . Protestors were beaten up by Loyalists, and more than forty Catholics were arrested (*Irish News*, February 26 1971). According to *The Belfast Telegraph*, groups of women « dressed in combat jackets, black berets and carrying hurlic sticks » were arrested (February 26 1971). On the same night, women marched on the Springfield Road towards the police station in protest after the day's arrests (Aretxaga 1997, 1998).

The 1970 curfew and subsequent events planted the seeds of female solidarity and political awareness for many women in the North. However it was not until the introduction of internment without trial in 1971 that women start organising among themselves and affirm their presence in the political arena.

II. Internment and the first steps into resistance

Internment without trial was introduced in Northern Ireland on August 9, 1971 in efforts to dismantle the IRA - which was allegedly reforming after it stopped its armed activity in 1962 (McCleery 2012). Three internment camps were set up that effect : one in Belfast, one in County Derry, and one in Belfast harbor (Flakes and Elliot 1989). It has been argued that the introduction of internment led to the escalation of violence and increased alienation of the Catholic/Republican community (Burton 1978, McCleery 2012, Jackson 2009). The policy lasted until December 1975, and resulted in 1,981 people being detained without trial, 1,874 of which were Nationalists (Join Committee on Human Rights, Parliament of the UK, 1975). Most internees were local men with no IRA affiliation (Spujt 1986). The arrests left many women to cope with raising their families alone, usually with little to no income (STIT 1972). Boys as young as sixteen were interned during this period. On September 19, 1971, a local newspaper *The Andersonstown News* published a letter by a « concerned mother of an internee » to the Cardinal of Ireland. Her son was arrested on his seventeenth birthday, after having been « constantly harassed since the age of fifteen ». The mother asked Cardinal Conway to demand the release of « all these innocent people ». What is interesting in the letter is the utilisation of the Catholic Church's idealisation of motherhood by a woman, against the Church itself, in a bid to confront the Catholic leadership on its silence in the face of political events. Again, women in Northern Ireland deployed notions of care and motherhood to protect their community against the violence of the State Motherhood has been at the centre of women building a collective identity in Northern Ireland (Bacik 2007).

As internment went on, women started using their close-knit community ties to organise among themselves in efforts to provide protection from police harassment and arrests. Some women replaced the interned men in branches of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (Edgerton 1986). The NICRA organised a huge civil disobedience campaign to protest against internment. Thirty thousand households joined the protest, by withholding payment of rent for council houses (Aretxaga 1997). Women, as household administrators, were best placed to organise and lead the protest. But the Northern Irish government

introduced the Payment for Debt Act in 1971, which allowed the withholding of benefits for those on rent strikes. This considerably reduced the budget of many families who were already struggling to survive- and many impoverished woman-headed households found themselves in deep debt where they had previously managed to avoid it.

The internment of men certainly created new ties and solidarities between women, who recognised the shared experience of coping alone, and living with the fear and anxiety of police harassment and violence (Fairweather et al. 1987, Pickering 2002, Aretxaga 1997). But although internment had led many women into the public arena of protest and collective organising, their mobilisation was usually perceived (and sometimes exercised) within the framework of dominant gender stereotypes. The portrayal of women as passive, harmless victims of war (Earles 2009, Bloom 2012) was manipulated by women and men on both « sides » of the conflict from the early 1970s. Women patrolled the streets, and walked in front of men during protests to ensure their safety. Such gender « inversion » was also employed by the IRA, who used women to carry ammunition – and knew how to use women's pseudo invisibility in the public space to enable their subversive activities (Arextaga 1997, Earles 2009). Gender reversal is not uncommon in colonial contexts : Fanon (1967) reports that Algerian women used their veils as symbols and tools of resistance during the Algerian war of liberation against France - « thus playing the assumption of the colonial authority against itself » (Aretxaga 1997 p.66). In Northern Ireland, women's clothing also took a symbolic role in republican culture: the police and army grew suspicious of women wearing coats, for fear they might be carrying ammunition (see *§4, Stops and Searches*, below). In Algeria as in Belfast, women redeployed gendered signs of their identity as veils of insurgency and resistance. Because women's bodies do not translate in terms of political conflict in the eye of the soldiers (Earles 2009, Ní Aoláin et al. 2011), in times of war women's bodies become transparent, meaningless and opaque. This invisibility was utilised by Republican women during the Troubles through defiant tactics that transgressed stereotypical paradigms of femininity and masculinity. In addition to walking in front of men during protests, carrying weapons under their coats and warning their community against the arrival of state forces, women also used the desexualisation of their own bodies in order to move undetected by police forces (Aretxaga 1997, Harris and Healy 2001, Earles 2009). This desexualisation included dressing in simple garments in order to be perceived as passive and subservient (Aretxaga 1997). In doing so, women effectively became the invisible mothers, daughters and wives that the state deemed incapable of revolutionary dissent. Resistance to state violence thus also encompassed some manipulation of traditional understandings of

femininity and the subversion of passivity and invisibility by Republican women.

III. House Raids and Hen Patrols : the home as a site of resistance

The British Army frequently conducted house raids and arrests, mostly in Catholic areas, and usually during the night, when people were less alert. The women of Republican districts came up with an alarm system to warn neighbours about the arrival of the patrols on their streets (Kilmurray 1987). They would bang bin lids against the pavements, and blow whistles (Kilmurray 1987, Arextaga 1997, Pickering 2002). The BA usually raided Catholic areas between 10 pm and 6 am, during which time women organised themselves to patrol streets on a rotating basis (Arextaga 1997). They would take turn in following the soldiers whereever they went. The BA patrols were nicknamed « duck patrols » - so the women called themselves the « hen patrols », in a humorous effort to subvert a threatening, violent reality. Indeed, the duck metaphor – this unthreatening, docile animal - (virtually) disarms the BA, while the hen metaphor empowers women and reverses the initial power dynamics. Such reversal allows women to symbolically move past their fear and into resistance, creating possibilities for a certain degree of control and of action. Fernandez argues that such nicknaming « makes manageable objects of the self and others and facilitates performance » (1986, p.6). The reversal of fear appears throughout many of the women's recollections. Clare, a Catholic woman from West Belfast, recalls:

> « *We followed the soldiers everywhere they went. I remember one saying that he could handle the men, but not the women. We made a lot of noise. Noise can be frightening. (…) We were outside making (…) noise, and when the soliders came we suddenly disappeared. The soldiers (…) who had been kicking us in the demonstrations were shaking, panicking, while we were in our houses, giggling away behind the curtains. They were terrified.* » (Arextaga 1997, p.68)

Night patrols stopped when the BA started shooting unarmed women during these operations. On October 23rd 1971, two sisters from the Clonard Women's Action Committee were shot dead , another woman was badly wounded. Shortly after, two women were shot, and another was permanently blinded by a plastic bullet fired by the BA during a house arrest. The metaphoric, symbolic use of women in resistance had been modified once the BA took the (unexpected ?...) step of shooting them – and so had the highly symbolic value attached to killings of women and children by state forces. But the attack of the Catholic/Republican community by the British government also became clear : by shooting

women, soldiers were shooting community resistance. The porous lines between public/private, home/community, collective/personal were blurred, as the female body became, once again, a highly charged space where different forces fought their battles (Ní Aoláin, Hayne and Cahn 2011).

House raids were part of the security forces' strategy of intimidation and harassment (Pickering 2000) of the Catholic/Republican community in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that around 250,000 houses – virtually, every catholic house in Belfast – were raided during the Troubles, and that 5 to 10% of the raids were « successful » (they resulted in arrests or valuable intelligence information for the security forces). House raids are effective methods of harassment of a particular community because they instill a sense of fear at both psychological and physical levels. The destruction of their home, the permanent harassment by state security forces as an everyday feature of life for many Nationalist women during the 1970s and 1980s, openly displayed the coercive nature of the British presence in the North. The home – a symbol for women's role as carers – became a site of confrontation between them and state forces, leaving women very little space to hide from the violence of the Troubles. House raids blurred the boundaries between the public and private, in ways that left women feel bereft of their privacy (Pickering 2000, Ní Aoláin et al. 2011). Interviewed by Harris and Healy (2001, p.21), Marian, then a housewive living in a nationalist area of Castlebergh, recalls :

> « There's no way of keepin' things to yourself if you're liable to be raided – nothing's private – for as I say they can go up and take out your pants and socks and they can go through all your corners that way nobody else can. »

House raids were an important factor in heightening women's awareness of the political situation at the time ; it has also been a catalyst for many women's resistance, for multiple reasons. Confronted with the presence of the police in their private, intimate space, women connected their own experiences with the wider socio-political context of the time. As will be explored in another section of this paper, other issues (such as poor education, poverty and unemployment) that were endemic to Northern Irish society also contributed to women's politicisation and engagement in the public sphere. Women developed ways to stand up to the security forces, particularly during raids. They tend to describe their resistance in terms of keeping their dignity and self-worth. Many women recall that it took time and practice to develop the confidence to resist the invasion of their homes. Interviewed by Harris and Healy (2001, p.67), Mrs Heaney, then a housewive in Derry, recalls :

> *« (...) I was afraid, the first time they raided. Actually, we did everything they asked us to do, into the one room an' wouldn't let us talk to each other, wouldn't let us out to make a cup of tea (...). But then as time went on, that all changed, I made tea if I wanted to, an' I talked if I wanted to. »*

Asserting normalcy during raids was one way in which women described regaining a sense of agency during the inspection (and sometimes destruction) of their home. Attempts to carry on normal life constituted acts of defiance against state forces, whose power was symbolically diminished by women who chose to ignore the soldiers carrying out the raids. While house raids transformed women's role as homemakers, many women used the performance of this role as a defense against the army's intrusion into their homes. Women prepared their homes for raids, thus making them a regular, « normal » part of their everyday life. They made sure their homes were clean and tidy, to avoid the mockery and insults of the army. The home was thus used as site of resistance and a tool for expressing agency through domesticity. Interviewed by Pickering (2000, p.65), Marion, a Derry woman, explains that :

> *« For a long time there, not so much now, but of a Sunday night mine would go to their bed and I would hoover and polish, cleaning everything up and clean the living room, the kitchen -have it gleaming spotless, even the floors washed everything done Sunday night before I went to bed because you were waiting on a raid the next morning. It was just the way sort of it affected me-you're not coming into my house dirty and untidy. And in a way you just got into that routine, as well, I would've had all the washing done and had the washing machine and all going on and the washing hanging out before I went to bed. I wouldn't let them walk in and say the house was dirty or untidy, I would be embarrassed if anything was lying about. »*

It remains that raids left a profound mark on women, long after they had ceased. Many women describe lying awake at night, waiting for an early morning raid. Others recall burning and destroying personal belongings as ways of protecting themselves. Breda, a Republican housewive living in Derry at the time, tells Harris and Healy (2001, p.25) :

> *« They go through everything, reading letters and everything. (...) The letters I had from Seán* (son) *in prison, I burned all of them (...). »*

Women also organised collectively to resist house raids. In particular, women in Catholic/Nationalist areas of the North took action within their community in efforts to inform themselves and others. Although most women's primary concerns seemed to be about the welfare and security of their children and homes (Pickering 2000, 2002), it remains that the confrontation with the security forces propelled women out of the home and into external

involvement with the community. As mentioned above, for instance, one of the earliest responses to state violence in the North during the start of the Troubles was women taking to the streets banging lids and blowing whistles to warn their neighbourhood against army raids. This collective organising also extended beyond confrontation with state agents, to encompass more militant activities. The experience of raids seems to have turned women's resistance into more proactive, non-traditional forms of action (Evason 1997, Pickering 2000). Some women described how their resistance entailed contravening gendered expectations in the home, the community and Northern Irish society :

> *« You lose your sense of fear for staters, you have to do things that are very dangerous (...). We were shot at, beaten, soldiers hit us with riffle butts, we were always getting into trouble. And then there was the women who happily joned the IRA (...) who were part of the war (...). But for the majority of women who were like myself at home, having children, not being able to have any other role than that we were doing these were all sorts of things that women really don't do, or were never permitted to do »* (Mary in Pickering 2000, p. 67-8).

Women's experiences of house raids also involved sexual intimidation, harassment, and sometimes sexual violence. Many women, especially those who were younger at the time, report having experienced some form of sexualised intimidation and harassment druing raids. As in many conflicts, women's sexuality is weaponised by State powers who use it to threaten, intimidate and discriminate communities (namely, the Catholic/Nationalist population in the North). Violations of women's sexual privacy furthered many women's politicisation, because they constituted a double attack on them as homemakers and as embodied individuals. Many women, particularly in those Nationalist areas that were regularly raided, had to develop mental barriers between themselves and the state forces, in order to survive the raids.

Sue, a Belfast woman, told Pickering (2000, p.73) :

> *« If you listen to women, its like being raped because they go through everything (...). They know everything about you, they know what you earn – everything. But you start building walls and have to say to yourself that they're not going to get you down. »*

Some Nationalist women report engaging in direct verbal abuse with soldiers during house raids, others have described remaining silent in defiance of the invasion of their homes. But women's sexuality, particularly in such a traditional, highly religious society like Northern Ireland during the Troubles, is a much more difficult reality to express resistance and defiance from. Women's gender was mobilised and manipulated by policing forces to

prevent them from expressing agency and moving outside the realm of passivity. The targeting of women's bodies and their sexuality has also conformed to women's political and socio-economic status in the North (Earles 2009, Bacik 2007). Rowbotham (1989) highlights how the State treats women differently according to a complex matrix of factors including race, class, political situation and geographical area. In Northern Ireland, women's contact with police forces was strongly shaped by their political, religious allegiance – and women from working class communities report experiencing much harsher encounters than their counterparts from more well-off areas of the North. Nell (Harris and Healy, 2001, p. 24), a working class woman living in a Republican area of Derry, recalls :

> *« (...) Once when my husband was in jail and I was living with me mother, they broke a sitting room window up there and went in the sitting room window and raided it like I wasn't in. (...) Another time, (...), me husband's father died and he was getting waked. And they raided our house during the wake. (...) They just walk in on you. »*

Such encounters strongly contrast with the experiences of middle-class women in the North. Sinéad, a full-time worker living in a middle-class area of Derry, reports that :

> *« The house was raided a few weeks ago and again it was very low key. You know, profuse apologies for coming in and stuff like that. »* (Harris and Healy 2001, p.24).

Marie, also a full-time worker from a middle-class background living in Derry at the time, argues that :

> *« (...) I think it was very much because of the area. They would regard this as a middle-class area – private housing is another factor. It's more expensive to repair, it's more complicated to get repaired, etc., plus the fact that they knew I was a so-called professional, so there was all that class thing. »* (Harris and Healy 2000, p.25).

Thus not only was the role played by police forces in Northern Ireland politicised and classed (Harris and Healy 2001), but it was also highly gendered in the political strategies deployed by the State. Although women's bodies were often used as tools for gender-based humiliation and violence during raids, at other times gender was erased or ignored by police forces who treated politicised women as Republicans firstly and women secondly (Pickering 2000, Kilmurray 1987, Aretxaga 1997). Many politicised Republican women describe their experience of raids as highly « desexualised » (Pickering 2000 p.75) ; some Nationalist women recall being treated as purely political beings (as opposed to embodied « females ») during their encounters with security forces. The degendering of these women appeared to serve the purpose of employing policing strategies to the fullest against anti-State

individuals, regardless of their gender (Pickering 2000). This confirms that women's bodies were ultimately targeted according to the political and socio-economic realities of Northern Irish society at the time (Earles 2009).

Security force invasion of the private has fostered many Republican women's opposition to policing forces in the North. In particular, working-class women from Catholic/Republican areas have resisted the invasion of their home through a range of actions – from individual acts of defiance to collective political action.

But the home was not the only site of confrontation between women and security forces in Northern Ireland.

IV. Interrogation and the politics of gendered intimidation

The contexts of police interrogation as well as stops and searches provide useful tools for an analysis of women's individual acts of agency in Northern Ireland. Both are arguably the most severe manifestation of the state in the region – and it is useful to examine women's modes of personal interactions and resistance strategies when confronted by such gendered modes of domination.

Police interrogation was largely governed by emergency legislation in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Interrogation in Northern Ireland was not governed by police guidelines or judicial requirements (Pickering 2002). Questioning is not limited to particular questions, and can be extended beyond a suspect's knowledge of criminal activity to cover information on their peers and community. In pratice, because suspects were unable to remain silent under the special legislation in place in Northern Ireland, they are obliged to provide any information they are asked – after which they are usually released without charge, typically after up to a week in detention (as was the case for 75-80% of arrested persons that were interrogated) (Pickering 2002). Introduced to combat political violence in the region, it has nonetheless been highly criticised by international bodies for the abuses associated with it (Asmal 1983, Committee on the Administration of Justice 1992, Liberty 1984/1992/1993/1995, Helsinki Watch 1991). Moreover, many have warned that emergency legislation in the North has simply not succeeded in effectively combatting political violence (Dickson 1993, Hillyard 1987/1993, Walsh 1988). Its longevity and use even during the ceasefire has led many observers to conclude that emergency legislation was primarily a tool for repressing, monitoring and surveilling the republican community rather than preventing

terrorist activity in the North (Boyle et al. 1975, Farrell 1983). The targeting of the republican community is reflected in the differential experiences of republican women and loyalist women in relation to interrogation and searches.

Given the proportion of individuals released without charge after interrogation, Hillyard (1993) notes that it appears that the primary goal of arrests was to gather intelligence and/or surveil the Irish community in the North, rather than « start proceedings against the suspect » (Hillyard 1993, p.148). Indeed, many women report facing questions about their private lives during interrogation. Attempts to resist such intrusion are recurring themes in women's accounts of their experience with policing.

Often resistance began during the arrest, as some women sought to disrupt the procedures they were asked to follow. Patricia, interviewed by Pickering (2001, p.345) about her experience of getting arrested for interrogation, recalls :

> *« (...) two of the male RUC people insisted on standing there also which meant that I was going to be forced to undress and dress in front of those men (...) and I managed to get the door shut and locked (...) and I was able to put my foot to the door and lock them out quickly ».*

Another woman, Kate, describes her efforts to disrupt the procedures of arrest through acts of defiance such as refusing to sit how she was required, preventing her photograph from being taken and demanding a qualified doctor conduct medical examination on her (Pickering 2001, p.346). Kate also reports refusing to answer any of the questions she was asked :

> *« When he started asking me all the questions I told him « that it was none of our business and you have no right to have me here and I'm not answering any of your questions. »*

Kate, like many women, was well aware of the political implications of the arrest and interrogation – namely, to gather intelligence on the republican community and on her human rights work. Refusing conversation with the police force was the most common method used by women in order to reassert their sense of integrity and identity. Many women report staying silent on the grounds that any piece of information could be used against them and/or members of their network. Security forces often attempted to use the « if you are innocent then you have nothing to fear » assertion to manipulated suspects into talking (Hillyard 1993, p.149). Paula (Pickering 2001 p.348) comments that :

> *« I wasn't answering any questions and they were also using this because 'you're sitting there and you're not answering questions then you must have some*

connections with the IRA, you must be a trained terrorist'. But if you were even politically aware you kept cases like the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four[3] in your mind ».

Some women also recall learning about the laws in place at the time, and using it when being questioned by the police. This strategy aimed at reversing the power (im)balance between women and security officers, through legal knowledge (as a typically respected and legitimate discourse). As such, the experience of interrogation encouraged many women to seek out information about the legal and institutional framework ruling state practices such as interrogation, searches and raids. It has contributed in raising women's political awareness and feminist consciousness.

Just like during house raids, many women report their sexuality being targeted during interrogations, in attempts by state forces to foster cooperation, intelligence gathering or simply to intimidate and/or threaten women. A small proportion of women also report having experienced sexual violence during interrogations. It seems however that the majority of the sexual abused received by women was verbal. Maire (Pickering 2001, p. 349), recalls :

« They would say to you : 'how many provos did you sleep with ? I suppose they were in your bed the other night', degrading language they would use, and turn around and call you a 'you're a slut anyway' (...) and say 'are you sure all the wains (children) are all his ? I don't think they are'. I knew that was their attitudes and their ways, I knew hearing other women talking that's how all women are treated (...) ».

In their testimonies, the women demonstrate awareness of their bodies as means of interrogation strategies dependent upon gendered norms. In the face of such threats, possibilities of resisting and exercising agency were greatly reduced – and posed an immediate risk for women's security. In Northern Ireland, women's bodies were routinely

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[3] The Birmingham Six were six Irishmen who got falsely convicted for the Birmingham pub bombings that killed 21 in 1974. They were held in custody and interrogated for up to twelve hours, and suffered abuse such as punches, food and drink deprivation, and mock executions. Four of them confessed while in custody, each was sentenced to 21 life sentences. In March 1991, following compelling new evidence of their innocence, the six men were freed and compensated for the seventeen years they spent in prison.
The Guildford Four were four Irish citizens wrongly convicted of bombings carried out by the PIRA at the Guildford pub in 1974. Following their arrest, all four had confessed, under intense coercion by the police. Their convictions were declared « unsafe and unsatisfactory » in 1989 and reversed in 1991 after they had each served fifteen years in prison.

used in relation to their personal relationship and sexual history to confront their political orientation and activism. In addition, children were often used as bargaining chips and means of intimidation of women by the police (Pickering 2001). Usually, the wellbeing of children was threatened if women refused to cooperate with interrogators. Joan (Pickering 2001, p. 349-350) reports that :

> *« They came in and said 'you've got a two and a half year old son , haven't you ? Well, you see, Joan, because you're a widow and you're not fit to rear a child, you can't do it right, your husband was a provo bastard, we're going to go up, we know where he is at your mother's and there are two jeeps on their way up there now to take him into welfare." They were going to take my two-year-old son and put him into care (...). And all stuff like this and I didn't know anything but that and I was thinking "can he do that? Is he right? Can they take my son?'"*

Aside from threatening the welfare of children, police routinely manipulated women's abilities as mothers and caregivers during interrogations. Many women report being « momshamed » by interrogators who used stereotypical notions of « good motherhood » in attempts to condemn and shame women for their presence in custody. Paula (Pickering 2001, p.350) remembers that one of the remarks was « *How did an attractive mother like you become involved in this kind of activity ?* ».

In the face of such techniques, remaining silent was one way of preventing their situation from worsening, while at the same time impeding the aims of interrogation. But this method of resistance proved highly difficult for many women in the face of such intimidatory, abusive questioning. Joan (Pickering 2001, p. 350) remembers that :

> *« There was all like one group of women in and they would say 'you're dirty, you're smelly, you're a scumbag, (...) you're really ugly, you'll never get another man because nobody will ever look at you because you are too ugly', (..) and I just thought 'you scumbags, I'm not talking to you', and it was my stubborness ».*

Other ways of resisting interrogations directly appealed to the female body and to the manipulation of stereotypical femininity. For instance, some women got their periods during their arrest and refused to ask the police force for menstruation products, clearly rejecting the idea of giving them too much ground – and thus not recognising their power over them. Some women remember the contrast between their position as the de-gendered, unfeminine detainee and the image of the feminine, idealised female interrogators :

> *« . . . the ones in Castlereagh, the women, they were worse than the men, because they make you feel that low. They're coming in well dressed, nails perfect, sitting*

filing their nails, painting their nails, not a smudge of make up out of place, not a
hair out of place and you're sitting there seven days without getting washed. So you
could just picture yourself, totally stinking, everything else, tired, exhausted. I didn't
even have underwear because they didn't give me the chance to get me underwear on.
And then I actually took my period during Castlereagh and that actually made me
feel even dirtier (…). »

In other cases, women used laughter to empower themselves during interrogations and custody, in efforts to undermine the intimidating atmosphere and power imbalance between them and the interrogators. The use of laughter by women is interesting inasmuch as it represents an important transgressive performance of femininity : laughter is typically characterised as « unfeminine » and « inappropriate » (Pickering 2002, Earles 2009).

In this way, staying silent, laughing, falling asleep or refusing cooperation with arrest procedures were not only ways for women to challenge what they deemed an unjust political system – they were also means of resisting patriarcal hegemony by circumventing stereotypical notions of 'political', 'feminine', and, indeed, the very concept of 'resistance' itself. It appears from the testimonies transcribed above that interrogation has been a site *par excellence* where hegemonic masculinity has sought to reassert and manipulate gender imbalance in efforts to undo women's political involvement in the North. It is no wonder, then, that experiences of interrogation and custody in Northern Ireland have fuelled many women's political awareness – just as house raids and curfews have refined their understanding of the relationships between the State, policing bodies and the community.

Similarly, stops and searches – which were common occurrences for many women at the time – have re-shaped women's expressions of agency in relation to state forces. In particular, strip-searching was used extensively against men and women as a means of intimidation and degradation ; and was never justified as a security measure (Harris and Healy 2001). Many women have called it sexual assault. Frances, who lived in Derry at the time, recalls that :

« A friend and meself were arrested in the street and taken to the military part of the
Strand road barracks. (…) We were taken into a room and told to remove our
clothes. (…) I was told that if I didn't that they would bring the soldiers in from
outside. Male soldiers in from outside to take them off. (…) It was probably more to
degrade you than, because they don't think for a minute that you are concealing
anything in your clothes (…). »

Strip-searching was complicated by the fact that it was usually carried out by women officers on women. Many of the women mention feelings of isolation and degradation as barriers to seeking support (particularly in the face of such unequal power dynamics). Women in prison could to a certain extent organise against strip searching because they were less isolated in their experience of it – as will be examined in the following chapter of this paper.

V. « Marriages break apart » : resistance within the home

The number of marriage breakdowns increased drastically from the beginning of the Troubles in the early 1970s – despite the strongly conservative attitude of Northern Irish culture. In 1971, 339 divorces were registered in Northern Ireland, 574 in 1976, while 2,310 were recorded in 1991 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2020).

Such numbers point to the impact of state and civil violence on the home, the family and intimate relationships. Indeed, the violence of the Troubles, and the extensive emergency powers given to police forces in the North, have reshaped the gender discourse within many families in the region. One important factor was the introduction of internment without trial, which left many women alone to cope with the home and welfare of their family, as well as the ever-present violence in their daily lives. As mentioned earlier in this paper, many women had started organising among themselves and taking up more space in the public fora after internment was introduced in 1971. This blurring of traditional boundaries between the public and private had re-shaped women's roles within Northern Irish society. Women's involvement in socio-political resistance from the early 1970s had challenged stereotypical gender discourses in more ways than one – and in turn had a significant impact on women's intimate relationships. Upon release of men internees in 1975, many wives were unwilling to go back to their secondary position as homemakers and mothers. Brigid, a Republican woman living in Catholic West Belfast at the time, recalls :

> *« Men were used to women being in the house all the time. But with internment there was no dinner-at-five and children-to-bed-at-eight. Everything was disorganised then. Men did not realise that, because they were locked up. Then when they came out they expected to find things as they left them. But women were not willing to go back into the house again. It was a big shock ! »* (in Aretxaga 1997, p. 75).

Marriages were inevitably distorted by the very different social experiences of men and women during internment. For many men, prisons had served as schools of republicanism (Artexaga 1997), while for women the hardship of coping alone had led to the creation and

strenghtening of new ties of solidarity within the community. As a result, many women, particularly those living in republican areas of the North, developed a new-found sense of independence and identity – as well as an appreciation of the political character of gender inequality in the region. In contrast, as Evason remarks, for many men « the notion of democracy within the home has so far made little progress » (Evason in *New York Times*, May 31 1981).

Moreover, harassment by security forces had a direct impact on relationships in a number of ways. Sometimes police forces tried to sow doubts in the other partner (for example, by suggesting to men that their wives were having affairs during interrogation or verbally abusing women in front of their husbands during house raids), effectively putting pressure on marriages. Deirdre (Harris and Healy 2001, p.94/95) recalls :

> *« (…) they've always tried to humiliate him (husband) with me. I remember one time they grabbed him by the ass of his trousers and he slipped down and he just laid there and wouldn't get up, you know all that stuff like. And I'm standing there looking down on him and they're going 'Get up, get up !' and kicking him about the place. (…). »*

The experiences of internment and political campaigning have led many women into 'officialdom' (Evason 1991) and activism on different levels in the North. While it is true that for many women in the region these new positions have entailed the discovery of a newfound strength, the reality is more complex than a drastic re-ordering of women's secondary position in the home. Although it was generally accepted that women take on new responsibilities while the men were interned, the husbands were sometimes resistant to such possibilities happening within the home (Edgerton 1986). Many husbands were quite hostile to notions of equality and equal power-sharing in the domestic sphere. In this way, resistance also echoed within the intimate sphere of women's lives during the Troubles, and led to marriage breakdowns as women increasingly found new individual and collective strengths as part of their mobilisation against state violence.

Conclusion :

For many women – particularly Catholic/Republican women living in working-class areas – the « learning process » began as a result of the invasion of their private sphere by state forces. The Falls Road curfew, internment without trial, house raids, strip searching and interrogation have led to the reshaping of many women's personal and collective identity in

Northern Ireland. In the face of state violence and intimidation, women have developed methods of resistance that simultaneously reinforce and dismantle gendered paradigms of stereotypical femininity. This shows the extent to which the expression of agency by women remained constrained by a framework of limited choice(s), even as new social and psychological spaces became available for women during that time. Similarly, some women in the North have found new ways of expressing agency through their involvement in the traditionally male sphere of political violence. This manipulation of violence by women, like their resistance to state violence, has many gendered aspects which we will explore in the second part of this paper.

2. Women using violence

Gendered assumptions about women's relationship to armed conflict and political violence permeate scholars' works on the topics. Women are often portrayed as irrational and more vulnerable to manipulation than their male counterparts (MacDonald 1991). Women perpetrators of violence are typically perceived as overly emotional, unthinking, and lacking agency. Oftentimes violence by women is perceived as unnatural, as is apparent in the results of a 2003 survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation of the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion (Stack-O'Connor 2007) – which shows that 84% of Russians believed that female suicide bombers were acting under the control of someone else, while 3% thought they were acting independently. This poll aligns with traditional assumptions that women are « forced » or « coerced » into armed violence.

Studies on the Troubles in Northern Ireland tend to gloss over women's role in political violence and armed struggle. Very little, moreover, has been written about the possibilities for expressing agency in traditionally male spaces like those of armed violence and political internment.

I. Commitment to political violence : republicanism and loyalism

Between 1969 and 1994, political violence killed approximately 3,200 people in Northern Ireland, around 200 of whom were women. These figures seem to suggest that women were significantly less involved in armed struggle than men. However, it would be oversimplistic to conclude that women systematically oppose political violence. In fact, the common

depiction of women as « peacemakers » contradicts findings that the range of views expressed by women about the Troubles is hardly different from those of men (O'Donnell 1977). Moreover, in such a traditional society like the Northern Irish one, women have long acted as transmittors of culture and tradition – and, as such, can be seen to sustain and strenghten segregation and resentment of the other (Morgan 1992). A careful examination of women's attitudes towards conflict in Northern Ireland thus shows responses spanning from active participation in armed struggle to active political engagement in peace campaigns. Data on women's implication in armed violence in the region is hard to find, due to the nature of the different organisations involved, as well as women's general reluctance to meet with researchers about their experiences (Bloom et al. 2012). Moreover, the publicised instances of such involvement only account for part of women's actual implication in physical violence in the North. Nevertheless it is very clear that women have been involved in numerous ways – especially on the Republican/Nationalist side of the conflict (Buckley and Lonergan 1983).

From 1969 to 1998, female Provisional IRA (PIRA) recruits accounted for 4,9% of total PIRA recruits (Bloom et al. 2012) – which means that approximately one in twenty PIRA members was female. An estimated fifteen women IRA members were killed between 1971 and 1991 (Morgan 1995).

Although much has been written on men's involvement in Loyalist/Unionist paramilitary organisations (hereafter LPOs) in Northern Ireland, investigations on women's participation in LPOs have been rare[4]. McEvoy's 2009 study on female loyalist paramilitaries shows that, although women joined LPOs in fewer numbers than men, women did take part in such organisations throughout the Troubles (McEvoy 2009). Her case study, which is based on interviews with thirty women identifying as members or supporters of LPOs, shows that women created their own UDA units in Protestant communities across the region (McEvoy 2009). She reports a combined membership « as high as three thousand women » (p.269). – although women made up an estimated 2% of the UVF membership between 1969 and 1998 (p.270).

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[4] It should be noted that a few researchers do acknowledge women's involvement in LPOs across Northern Ireland. See for instance : M.Alison (2004) « Women as Agents of Political Violence : Gendering Security », Security Dialogue 35, no. 4. See also Fairweather et al. (1987), *Only the Rivers Run Free : Northern Ireland : the Women's War*, London : Pluto Press and R.Ward (2006), *Women, Unionism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland : from « tea-maker » to Political Actors*, Dublin : Irish Academic Press

The relatively low number of women members of paramilitary organisations on both « sides » of the conflict can be explained by an intersection of different factors. Firstly, men are psychologically more inclined to engage in high-risk violent activity than women (Silke 2008). Secondly, men are usually more sought-out by recruiters (Fine-Davis 1988) – particularly in a society with rigid gender norms. Finally, organisations like PIRA had a number of affiliated organisations and groups that evolved over time. Among those was *Cumann na mBan* (« the women's council »), a female auxiliary to the IRA, which operated a mainly supportive role to the military campaign. The organisation was founded in 1914 to provide support for the Irish Volunteers, and rose to fame for supporting the Easter Rising against British rule in 1916. The organisation has been credited with playing a major role in the successful Irish War of Independence and subsequent formation of the Irish state. In fact, IRA Commandant Brennan said that the IRA flying columns « would have collapsed without *Cumann na mBan* » (Ward 1983). In 1970, following a split in the Irish republican movement, *Cumann na mBan* joined the newly-formed PIRA.

1. From supporters to bombmakers : activities within the Paramilitary groups

During the Troubles, the women of *Cumann na mBan* were responsible for tasks such as the « selection and stocking of safehouses, the training and provision of first aid, and the cleaning and loading of guns » (Buckley and Lonergan 1983). Other roles included acting as « honey traps » by luring British soldiers into apartments to be killed by PIRA members[5], and acting as couples, for a couple was less likely to be perceived as a threat[6]. Some women also gathered information, such as Rosena Brown, branded the « PIRA's Mata Hari » (*Belfast Telegraph* 2009 in Bloom), who collected information from a senior prison officer that led to the death of one of his colleagues in 1988. Women from *Cumann na mBan* also carried messages and weapons, along with other vita operational information (Bloom et al. 2012).

Likewise in LPOs, women's tasks included the transportation and/or storing of weapons, the gathering of intelligence, surveillance, cleaning crime scenes, smuggling LPO goods into

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[5] In March 1973, three British soldiers were killed this way in a Lisburn hotel. In September 1991, another British soldier was similarly killed in the Stranmillis park in Belfast (Bloom et al. 2012)

[6] In November 1991, Frank Ryan and Patricia Black-Donnelly died when the bomb they were carrying detonated prematurely (McKittrick et al. 1999).

detention facilities, and sometimes carrying out beatings and punishments on behalf of the organisations (McEvoy 2009).

Although much of women's activity has been at support level, they have also been directly involved in physical violence. Many women in fact directly joined the PIRA and participated in much more violent activities than their *Cumann na mBan* counterparts. In 1972, newspaper *The Belfast Telegraph* reports that the British Army's dossier on women's participation was expanding, and that women were playing « an increasingly important role in PIRA activities (…) » (*Belfast Telegraph* 1971). This level of involvement from women who directly joined the ranks of the IRA has been understudied. This is regrettable, as figures clearly show that many women PIRA members consistently engaged in violent activity during the Troubles (Bloom et al. 2012). In the early 1970s, violent activity included women targeting shops, hiding bombs under their clothes, prams, underwear or platform heels. Some nights, up to ten bombs were found in Belfast shops, usually timed to explode after shops had closed. The aim was to disrupt the economic life of the city, making it hard for the British government to maintain their government in the region (International Center for the Study of Terrorism). With the introduction of interment without trial in the early 1970s, flocks of teenage girls and young women joined the ranks of the PIRA, usually to carry and hide exploding devices in the hope that they would not be carefully examined by security forces (*Daily Telegraph* 1972). In the early years of the Troubles, many died as a result of premature explosions[7]. Other women have partaken in plots involving shootings and assassinations[8], while others have been involved in illegal fundraising and gunrunning schemes.

2. Women, the community and the IRA: Terrorists or (s)heroes ?

Oftentimes, media coverage and mainstream representations convey a depthless, uni-dimensional picture of the Northern Irish conflict. Far from being one of meaningless violence, fear and deaths, the 'Northern Irish story' is one of deep-rooted historical and political crises. Similarly, for many in the North the IRA was not seen as a terrorist organisation. Indeed, many Catholics/Republicans in the North perceived IRA members as

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[7] For a full account of women killed in premature explosion, see Bloom et al., 2012, p. 68-9
[8] Sinn Féin member and current Representative to the US Rita O'Hare has a warrant for skipping bail after her arrest in the UK following the 1971 attempted murder of a BA soldier. Several other women have been convicted for attempted murder since 1971 (Bloom et al. 2012).

freedom fighters in a war against unjust foreign military occupation, engaged in efforts to obtain what Republicans deemed a legitimate aspiration – namely, that of a united Ireland. In this way, the IRA campaign was seen as the culmination of over eight hundred years of efforts to drive the British out of Ireland. However, it should be noted that it was usually the everyday experience of harassment and violence that left a deeper scar on the Republican community – particularly on Catholic/Republican women, who probably carried most of the weigh from the long-term impact of violence in the North, both materially and psychologically. Moreover, many Republican civilians turned to the IRA for protection against Unionist/Loyalist incursions into their area (Fairweather et al. 1987), particularly as turning to the police was unacceptable in many Catholic areas across the North. Many did look to the IRA to control the level of violence and crime in the communities – with IRA officers often serving as civil police (Fairweather et al. 1987).

These two factors (the republican perception of IRA as freedom fighters and the factual role of the IRA as civil policers in Catholic areas) seem to account for the wide support the IRA benefitted from throughout the Troubles, despite its campaign of high-scale violence. When asked about the IRA, Mairead, a woman living in the Catholic ghetto of Ardoyne, said :

> *« People get upset and angry about the violence of the IRA, but forget to ask themselves why the violence exists. I remember the first person to die as a result of the Troubles. He was called Sammy Devenney and was batoned to death by the RUC in his own living room in April 1969. Then in August of that year the RUC shot dead nine- year-old Paddy Rooney in Divis Flats. People forget these things. (…). The IRA have been responsible for many things but they weren't responsible for these deaths, nor for the assassination of over 850 innocent Catholics and the recent murders of kids and women by plastic bullets. (…) ».*

In the early 1970s, many women thus joined the IRA as part of the Republican struggle for a united Ireland, and as a response to their own experience of state and loyalist violence. These everyday experiences are often reinforced by a strong sense of anger about the discrimination and harassment faced by Catholics in the North at the time. Cathleen recalls :

> *« (…) I knew from our own cramped and rotten house that Catholics never got a fair deal either. But it was only when the British Army came on to our streets that I became deeply aware that it wasn't the Unionist government alone who were responsible. It was only then that I realised just what Britain's involvement was in this country and what they had done to our lives. »*

The same sense of « duty » to protect the community from the violence of the « other side » appears in the testimonies of women involved in LPOs at the time. An anonymous interviewee told McEvoy (2009, p. 263) :

> *« The question (of why I committed acts of paramilitary violence) was put to me umpteen times at different places… And (…) I say « Me and my kind were there so that you and your kind could go to bed at night and sleep. (…) It was something you felt you had to do. You were there. (…) It was your duty to do it. »*

The sense of duty towards the community felt by politically violent women on both republican and loyalist sides of the conflict is interesting inasmuch as it departs from the stereotypical imagery of women as passive victims of war, who need to be protected from the 'evil other'. This reversal of gender roles in the case of violent women is also particularly suprising considering the strong influence of conservative forces in the region at the time. As such, an analysis of violent women allows us to depart from common depictions of them as victims or martyrs (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). An examination of women's participation in Cumann na mBan, the UDA and PIRA effectively refutes the common assumption that « women are irrelevant to the making and fighting of wars » (Sjoberg 2006, p.897).

Moreover, the case of women combatants makes the case for rethinking the power dynamics at the heart of conflict, especially those relying on the public/private relationship. Evidence of women's participation in physical violence during the Troubles certainly interrogates the « causal link between power in private spaces and power in public spaces » (Enloe 2007) – as women wielding political violence depart from prevalent notions of femininity and masculinity. For example, the private/public distinction is blurred when a woman is crafting a petrol bomb in her home…Violent women testify to the complexity of gender paradigms in the study of conflict, and point to the regrettable lack of frameworks to study and research women's agency in political violence, even in conflicts as recent as the Northern Irish one.

3. « *They didn't take ordinary human beings* » : female presence in the POs

By joining POs, women in the North were rejecting gender as a discriminating factor in political militancy. But patriarchal mindsets and behaviours were difficult to challenge within these organisations. Because heteronormative patriarchy portrays woman as the « Other » (Beauvoir 1949), and man as the « universal », many women have felt the burden of their newly recognised presence in POs. Many report feeling compelled to constantly re-

assert their competency and legitimacy in order to be treated like their male counterparts (Fairweather et al. 1987).

Although data on female recruitment in paramilitary organisations is sparse, some women have described their own experience of joining the ranks of the IRA. Women's testimonies show that unequal gender dynamics operated within these organisations. Explaining why she chose to join the IRA when she could have worked with *Cumann na mBan*, Cathleen recalled that :

> *« I had this very close friend (…). She told me she'd applied to join Cumann na mBan and met the Brigade OC to discuss the matter. She was incredibly upset by the interview. They asked her if she was married and if not if she was living with somebody, who he was, (…), how many children she had. Because she was divorced it was used against her. They put her private life on the line and said she wasn't suitable because of it. It wasn't the image that Cumann na mBan wanted to portray. They didn't take divorced women, they didn't take women who were living with men or who had illegitimate babies. In other words, they didn't take ordinary human beings (…). »* (Fairweather et al., p.236-7)

For Cathleen, *Cumann na mBan* was following the Catholic depication of 'Mother Ireland' by casting out of its ranks any woman who did not conform to the stereotypical roles of wife, mother or virgin. Fairweather (Fairweather et al. 1987) reports that in 1975 another woman was forced to stand down from *Cumann na mBan* because she was pregnant and unmarried – and thus did not live up to the motto of the *gCailini* (the junior branch of the organisation) : « strength in our arms, truth on our lips and purity in our hearts ». This woman tells Fairweather (1987, p. 239) :

> *« They were all furious when I got stood down for being pregnant, but the decision was made at a higher level by real puritans who think every pregnancy should be like the Immaculate Conception. But it is the feeling of closeness and solidarity that holds the organisation together and makes women stay in it. It makes up for the way that you're sometimes abused by the men in the IRA when you go out on a joint operation (…). They think you're inferior because you're in Cumann na mBan and there just to do everything they say because they know better. »*

Women often report developing strong emotional and social ties with other women within their organisations. However, many women's experiences in the POs (particularly in *Cumann na mBan* during the early years of the conflict) reflect the sexual double-standards that operated in such organisations. Some have argued that there was a greater degree of

gender equality in the IRA – particularly in relation to the tasks and roles conferred to women members. Overall, however, it does seem that women worked in all spheres of activity within the IRA. One woman told Fairweather (1987, p.241-2) :

> *« You see, we have women who work in all spheres – the carrying of weapons, planting bombs, making them, setting up operations, carrying out the jobs, bringing the weapons and getting them away after the job. (…) Sometimes women train male volunteers. (…) I think it is true to say, however, that a woman has to be better than a man initally to prove herself. After that, though, there's no obstacles. Whoever's most skilled is in charge, be it a woman or a man. »*

There were, of course, strategic reasons for putting women forward for such tasks. Women were considerably less likely to be searched or questioned than men. Because they are generally seldom perceived as threats, their gender can be manipulated to serve the paramilitary organisations' aims. Due to lack of data on the topic, it would be presumptuous to come to a firm conclusion about the gender imbalance present within republican and loyalist POs during the Troubles. No evidence gathered so far, however, allows us to think that these organisations were immune from patriarchal dynamics. This is unsurprising, as these groups are spaces founded upon stereotypical notions of masculinity – such as armed violence, hierarchy and duty to protect.

In addition, women's engagement in paramilitary organisations (particularly on the Republican side of the conflict) has touched upon the intersection between colonialism and sexism in Northern Ireland. Women's presence in the paras represented competition for Republican men who strove to 'take back' their masculine identity from that of their colonisers (Earles 2009). Moreover, female participation in paramilitary groups caused intense disruption to both hegemonic discourses at play in the North : IRA women were no longer fulfilling their secondary role of supporting Irish men or the British government.

4. Perception by the general public : from manipulation to mystification

The public's response to women's participation in violent groups testifies to widespread assumptions about women as peaceful, conciliatory individuals. Although women formed a tiny proportion of PO members, incidents involving women were highly publicised during the conflict. This shows that women's direct participation in armed struggle (still) shocks the general public, particularly in highly conservative societies. The intense media attention in

the killing of IRA member Mairéad Farrell in Gibraltar in 1988[9] – while two of her colleagues were killed alongside her – proves that the symbolic significance of women paramilitaries can often outweigh their numerical strength (Fairweather et al.1987).

Women's involvement can also be manipulated by both sides in attempts to descredit the other one. As part of the propaganda war, women are used to further violent campaigns in different ways. Sometimes they are depicted as heroines and martyrs willing to sacrifice their life for their beliefs (as was the case for Farrell after her assassination[10]). At other times, women's involvement is presented as evidence of the group's depravity and lack of morals (Morgan 1996).

Either way, gender is manipulated throughout discourses of the 'other' in attempts from both sides of the conflict to assert the rightfulness and legitimacy of their claim(s). If anything, this shows that women's involvement in physical violence, though constantly substantiated, is far from being normalised, even as we move towards more complex and inclusive understandings of women's agency during conflict.

While women perpetrators of physical violence have destabilised stereotypical paradigms of gender and sexuality, the women interned at the Armagh and later Maghaberry jails similarly manipulated their gender in order to express agency in an environment of institutionalised gendered oppression.

II. « Our bodies are weapons of war »: the gendered politics of punishment and resistance in Armagh

I am one of many who would die for my country.

I believe in fighting the fight to the end. If death

Is the only way, I am prepared to die.

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[9] Three IRA members were shot dead by the British Army in Gibraltar in 1988. There was a particular media emphasis on Farrell at the time (Morgan 1996).
[10] For instance, see L.Jacobsen (2020), « Women for Ireland : Republican Feminism in the Northern Ireland Troubles », Theses and Dissertations 25

I'll wear no convict uniform

Nor meekly serve my time

That Britain might brand Ireland's fight

800 years of crime

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One in twenty prisoners detained during the Troubles was a woman (Corcoran 2006). Yet, most accounts of internment in Northern Ireland have been centered around men's experiences of political imprisonment. Little has been written on women's involvement as political prisoners in Armagh and, later, Maghaberry jails. An account of women's experiences of internment allows for a better understanding of gendered system(s) of punishment in prisons, and paints a more inclusive picture of the North's unique prison system – one that has been shaped by political violence and conflict. The penal regime in Northern Ireland was characterised by its high rates of imprisonment for « politically motivated » offences, and for the unusual length of the custodial sentences (McEvoy 1998). Over the course of the conflict, the British state used a wide array of techniques to silence, punish, repress and intimidate politically motivated inmates. It has also used different gendered forms of punishment on Republican women prisoners, all of which have been resisted and, in turn, manipulated by women in bids to (re)gain agency while behind bars. Republican women in Armagh jail played a major role in the nationalist campaign of resistance in the North, from the start of their internment in 1972 to the release of the last female inmate in 1998.

1. The context : the February 1980 assault

Armagh was the only women's jail in Northern Ireland. It was built in the late eighteenth century (Loughran 1986) and held Republican women prisoners from then until the Belfast Agreement of 1998. Over the course of the Troubles, the majority of Armagh prisoners were charged with 'terrorism' related offences and were considered (and self-identified as)

political prisoners. The Emergency Provisions Act (NI) defined terrorism as the 'use of violence for political ends' (Taylor 1980 in Wahidin 2016). Political prisoners were held with those of their own political belief, under their own recognised commanding officer. They did not wear prison uniforms and did not have to do prison work (Loughran 1986, Fairweather et al. 1987). By 1975, Armagh jail held up to 120 Republican women (Loughran 1986) . In 1976, the introduction of the British government's criminalisation policy meant that all new prisoners were denied political status and were to be held in a separate wing from their peers (Moen 1999). This loss of status also implied reduced exercise and time for handicrafts, and limited food parcels (Loughran 1986). Withdrawal of political status sparked off the 'blanket protest' in the men's prisons and culminating in the 1980 hunger strikes that resulted in the death of ten men a year later (*Irish Times* October 3rd 1981). Meanwhile 29 sentenced Republican women were on protest for political status in Armagh (Fairweather 1987). They refused to do any prison work and consequently lost fifty percent of their remission and were put on lock-up whilst their inmates went to work (Fairweather 1987). On February 7th 1980, after months of tension that had built up since the withdrawal of political status, the situation blew up and the 'dirty protest' began. Around 3pm on that day, men in riot gear entered the cells of prisoners in Armagh, allegedly to conduct a search (McCafferty 1981). When the women objected, they were pushed to the ground, beaten and kicked (Aretxaga 1997). Ann Bateson, a Republican woman interned in Armagh at the time, recalls :

> « *I was sitting in my cell when three male screws (officers) burst in with riot gear. The three of them held me on the bed, then grabbed me by the arms and legs, and dragged me out of my cell. At the same time they kept punching me. (…) They carried me spread-eagled downstairs. (…) My trousers and jumper were nearly off me at this stage, but the governor told the screws to hold me in that position and not to let me down. (…) They threw me into an empty cell. One of them kicked me while I was lying on the floor (…).* » (Women Protest for Political Status in Armagh Gaol, 1980).

The notes, testimonies and reports by other women detainees about that day echo Ann's experience. In a smuggled letter, Mairead Farrell, leader of republican prisoners in Armagh, wrote that : « We have got something to eat. Still not allowed use of toilet facilities. We have been forced into a position of 'dirty strike' as our pots are overflowing with urine and excrement. We emptied them out of the spy holes into the wing. The male officers nailed them closed, but we broke them using our chairs. » (Aretxaga 1997). Farrell's account debunks the British government's claim that the women started the process of their own free

will[11]. Moreover, the women claim that the beatings leading to the dirty protest had been strategically planned. McCafferty (1981) reports that on that day, the detainees had been offered an unusually good lunch, that made them leave their cell as soon as they opened, while common prisoners were locked in their cell and administrators left the quarters. The male officers carrying out the searches came from Long Kesh (the prison holding Republican political prisoners in the North) and the reason they were brought into Armagh is unclear – Aretxaga writes : « *why were the male officers brought in if it was not for a gendered form of punishment ? – one that would subjugate not only militant prisoners but also women ?* » (1997, p.125). On February 13th, the prisoners were moved to the « A Wing » of Armagh – two were held in an eight-by-twelve-foot cell (Prisons Memory Archive) with two pots, two plastic mugs, plastic knives and forks. They were not allowed any other personal belongings than their rosary beads (Aretxaga 1997). In a letter to her family, Mairead Farrell describes :

> « *The stench of urine and excrement clings to the cells and our bodies. No longer can we empty the pots of urine and excrement out of the window, as the male screws have boarded them up. Little light or air penetrates the thick boarding. (…) Sanitary towels are thrown into us without wrapping. We are not permitted paper bags or such like so they lie in the dirt until used. For twenty three hours a day we lie in these cells.* » (Wahidin 2019 p.117)

Aside from the psychological and physical pressures engendered by the dirty strikes, the women in Armagh also had to deal with their menstrual cycle. Sanitary products were rationed and often women had to sit in their own menstrual blood amidst excrement and urine.

2. Dynamics of bodily resistance : period blood and the gendered politics of dirt

For the women embarking on the no-wash strike, lack of access to sanitation and restricted opportunities to maintain rudimentary bodily care caused serious psychological stress. Many women report feeling alienated from their bodies and from standards that they intrinsically connected to their female identity. Winnie (Corcoran 2006 p.175) recalls :

> « *The first time I actually had to spread my own excreta on the wall, I cried, because it was debasing. I was thinking 'Mother of God, what the hell am I doing ?'. It was*

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[11] The Northern Ireland Office claimed the protest was 'self-inflicted', for propaganda reasons.

like most things, you sort of pull yourself out… you're doing it because you've been put into it. (...) »

Self-neglect, alongside other practices such as strip strikes, hunger strikes and environmental destruction, is a common pattern of prison protest.

Official disciplinary and medical discourses separated the « genuinely unfit » (Corcoran 2006 p.176) prisoners who needed medical care and the 'recalcitrants' who suffered from « self-inflicted » (p.176) conditions. Republican women interned in Armagh maintain that they were denied access to health care so long as they remained on strike :

« When we were on the no-wash we were all checked. Well, not checked ; the doctor looked into the cell and went out again. We were all designated as being it during the protest. Before no-wash, we were called once a month to be weighed. (...) Byt when we went on the no-wash there was nothing. (...) There was no medical care at all. It was to see if they could break us » (Winnie in Corcoran 2006, p.176).

Additionally, as Margaret D'Arcy (1981) observes, the women in Armagh – particulary those serving long sentences - were completely dependent upon the British medical authority for basic care and, sometimes, survival. The lack of trust between patient and doctor, efforts from the medical staff to 'shroud itself in mystery' (D'Arcy 1981) in order to shield itself from the scrutiny of the general public, and the institutionalised control over female bodies in prison have all contributed to the ill-being of female inmates in Armagh - and their feeling that they were lacking control over their own bodies whilst incarcerated (D'Arcy 1981).

This neglect of women's clinical needs highlights what Sim (1990, p.164) describes as the intersection between the need for security and control on the one hand, and the institutionalised pathologisation of women's behaviours on the other. For instance, the fact that common prisoners did not participate in the dirty strike was often used by the authorities to point to the fact that the 'other' prisoners were conforming (Corcoran 2006).

Moreover, images of the dirty protest proved shocking and incomprehensible for both republican men and the general public. A famous photograph of Mairéad Farrell, standing in her cell near her iron bed, with the walls behind her splattered with excrement, testifies to the ambiguity of notions like 'purity' and 'hygiene' in discourses of the (gendered) 'Other' (Douglas 1984, Hoy 1996). In the context of Irish colonial history, in particular, the no-wash strike revived old discourses and anxieties over the 'dirty Irish' by contrasting the women's secreting bodies with the idealised (bourgeois) woman's purity and cleanliness. In this context, right-wing papers *Daily Telegraph* (27 August 1980) described Armagh women as

'the effluent brigade which has tried to prove something or other for Mother Ireland… by sitting in its own excrement'. Douglas (1966) describes how notions of dirt and purity organise ideas of savagery and civilisation, in line with class differences, particularly in (post)colonial contexts. Thus, in line with gendered cultural paradigms assigning cleanliness or dirtiness to objects and individuals (Douglas 1984), the women's no-wash protest in Armagh was largely descredited because it contravened stereotypical notions of femininity. At both cultural and personal level, the meaning of women's dirty protest differed from that of their male counterparts – precisely because it transgressed the boundaries of the social order. The symbolism of blood and faeces as a reality that is jettisoned from public discourse, that remains outside of mainstream representation, makes the actuality of the women's protest hard to articulate within *existing* discourses and forums. Within the nationalist community, although the women's protest was largely acknowledged as part of the republican fight against British imperialism, many found it difficult to empathise with or simply recognise the Armagh women's suffering. Their situation was remote from Catholic/Nationalist imagery of either the suffering Mother or the naked, beaten young man symbolising Jesus Christ (Aretxaga 1997). The women in Armagh embodied a different kind of suffering – that of 'ordinary' women (of which menstruation is a symbol). A former Republican prisoner told Aretxaga (1997, p.141) :

> « *I do get the impression that people outside don't fully realise that there are actually women in Armagh. They don't understand what women are going through both physically and psychologically. You go through a lot with your menstrual cycle.*»

The Catholic taboo of sexuality has erased women's experiences while nationalist discourse has centered models of femininity around 'Mother Ireland'. Armagh women deviated from both imageries and, as such, their presence in jail and subsequent dirty protest represent resistance *per se*.

Many, however, attributed women's presence in jail to an idealistic, naive youth, free from family and work commitments. Fiona tells Aretxaga (1997, p.137) :

> « *People thought that women's involvement was just a passing thing ; they didn't take it very seriously.* »

In addition, many republican men expected politically active women to abandon their activity once they got married.

At best, the women's protest was regarded as an extension, a mimicry of the men's protest in Long Kesh (Aretxaga 1997) : partly because it was continuously overshadowed by the

'blanket protest' at Long Kesh, and partly because of the socio-cultural expectations around the acceptable use of female bodies politically (Corcoran 2006).

It is a fact that within prisons disciplinary techniques over the body play a strong role in the deployment of power, with women's sexuality constituting a crucial 'dense transfer point for relations of power, one endowed with great instrumentality' (Foucault 1980, p.103). As such, medical neglect and male officers' assaults can be regarded as institutionalised attempts to discipline through punishment, as well as affirmations of male dominance over female sexuality (Aretxaga 1997).

3. Emprisonment, gender and agency : paradox of interned women

Although the women saw no difference between their protest and that of the men in Long Kesh (the prison strikes were seen as struggles for political recognition), menstruation symbolised a carefully obliterated distinction – one that underlies sexual difference. While the women in the IRA were largely de-sexualised (Fairweather 1997), period blood seemed to 're-sexualise' women, and to shift the content of protest in new, unconventional ways. But this re-invention of resistance comes with its own limits, particularly in the context of prisons as a site of reproduction and perpetuation of institutional power. Outside of the prison context, agency is experienced by the individual as a site where ability meets the intersection of factors such as age, sexuality, gender, class and race. In prison, agency is circumscribed by the limits imposed on both will and expression (Moore and Scraton 2014). The framework for prisoners' self-determination is created by internal rules, and the intervention of professional agents – both governmental and medical. Nelson Mandela (1994, p.340-1 in Moore and Scraton 2014) wrote about the purpose of prisons as sites of exclusion and neglect :

> « *The challenge for every prisoner… is how to survive prison intact, how to emerge from a prison undiminished, how to conserve and even replenish one's beliefs. (...) Prison is designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve. (...)* »

Social and ideological determinants (class, race, gender, sectarianism, sexuality etc.) permeate each individual's experience and capacity to self-determine (Scraton and Haydon 2002). As such, agency and 'free-will' are always relative and constrained. Notwithstanding, there is always room for exercising influence over personal circumstances, even in the context of prisons as sites of authoritarian and punitive power. Women in Armagh have been able to contest and overturn sexist stereotypes about their femininity. In line with Mandela's

claim that prisons are « designed to break one's spirit » (above, 1994), resistance by Armagh prisoners thus consisted both in disobeying the rules and engaging in strategies for maintaining their identity and spirit (Carlen and Worrall 2004). However, as Corcoran observes (2006), although resistance by Republican women in Armagh was intended to refute the institutional manipulation of their bodies, it has also strenghtened the « pathologisation » (p.99) of female protest. What Corcoran calls the 'paradox of women's imprisonment' (p.100) lies in the fact that it is *within* the (formal and informal) penal controls exercised against them that women find means of expressing agency and creating opportunities for resistance. O'Keefe (2006, p.536) sums up this paradox nicely in relation to the use of period blood in resisting penal forces in Armagh:

> « *In the Northern Irish conflict, British sate forces used menstruation as a weapon of war against Republican women. More significantly, menstruation became a weapon of resistance when women political prisoners reclaimed the ability to menstruate and used it against their captors.* »

The paradox of women's imprisonment explains why women who challenge the penal system face harsh administrative harassment (Law, 2009). Punishment for recalcitrant prisoners often took the form of practices disguised as « 'time out', 'special observation' or 'crisis support' » (Moore and Scraton 2013 p.43). A woman prisoner held in the Mourne House unit of Maghaberry told Moore and Scraton (2013 p.34) :

> « *When we arrived at the gate to the Punishment Block there was a women out of her cell mopping what appeared to be an already clean corridor. Ellie is one of two women held on punishment. (…)* »

Róisin McAliskey, a young pregnant woman arrested in 1996 in connection with an IRA attack on a BA base in Germany, was categorised as a 'special' high-security inmate and subsequently interned in a male high-security prison, where she was subjected to high levels of surveillance, and regularly denied access to visits, adequate health care and exercise (Moore 2011). These informal disciplining strategies served to isolate and control women without exercising physical violence – and they often left women prisoners feeling guilty about their « sense of unease, isolation and powerlessness » (Carlen 1983, p.36). McAliskey was transferred to a psychiatric unit after the birth of her baby, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Moore 2011). Together with the consciousness of their family responsibilities, these punitive practices caused women prisoners intense psychological suffering. Separation from their children, death of a loved one and psychic coercion are part

of a continuum of sexual violence (Kelly 1988) which threaten the emotion, physical and psychological well-being of internees. Maureen, an ex Armagh prisoner, recalls :

> « *It takes quite a few months to settle into prison routine. Everyday is exactly the same. Depression is the biggest killer in jail. You have to fight it all the time. (…) The only time I felt depressed was after seeing my family on visits. It wasn't myself I was upset about. It was them going home and worrying. You see, your family does your time for you.* » (Fairweather et al. 1987, p.217).

The grieving process after the loss of a loved one was deterred within the prison. For detainees, mourning was not an option in the face of the harsh conditions of the protest and internment – which required (at least some) repression of overwhelming emotions in order to sustain the collective psyche. Moreover, as is common in imprisonment, displays of emotional vulnerability rendered inmates more susceptible to be harassed by staff members (Aretxaga 1997).

In the context of prisons, therefore, women are faced with a violent, punitive form of institutionalised gendered vulnerability. In Armagh, and, later, in Maghaberry jail[12], Republican women were operating within a stratified sexist, anti-Nationalist and class-based system of oppression. Their responses could not escape being interpreted through dominant paradigms labelling what was 'shameful', 'deviant' and 'criminal'. Notwithstanding, the Armagh dirty protest certainly sparked a process of cultural and social change in the North. The striking symbolism of period blood highlighted the erasure of experiences of femininity from public discourse. The power of the protest lay in the manipulation by women of gendered powerlessness against gendered forms of institutional punishment.

4. « Is Armagh a feminist issue ? » : the solidarity inside, the debate(s) outside

The women's awareness of the repressive nature of institutional life in Armagh prison allowed them to create and maintain alternative communal and intellectual identities which

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[12] Armagh jail closed in 1986. All female inmates were transferred to Mourne House, the women's quarter of the new high-security Maghaberry prison complex. Male detainees were moved to Maghaberry in 1987. A year later, both quarters were redesigned as a single prison. The women's unit, Mourne House, held political and common prisoners and could hold 59 women over 4 wings (Fairweather et al. 1987).

they sustained outside the reality of internment. As Eilís, an internee at Armagh, told Corcoran (2006, p.124) :

> « *As an internee, you didn't know how long you were going to be there, so what you needed was a routine, and you needed your plans and you needed to carry them out. You weren't going to adhere to the prison system's routine, so you formed an alternative regime, which they ended up having to come to terms with. What that involved was a prison structure (...). »*

One of the ways in which prisoners expressed psychological and physical autonomy was through the construction of a political community centered around collective identity as *Republican* prisoners. :

> « *Before we gained political status, you had that attempt to maintain control over us. But with more and more women coming in (...) they had to open up and give us political status anyway (...). We had our own system in place. (X) was in charge, and there was our officer system, and she would have been naming who mediated with the governor on anything. (...) »*

Eilí's account testifies to the 'self-disclipining' (Corcoran 2006 p.124) structure of the prisoners' organisation in Armagh. Margaret D'Arcy, who was held at Armagh for three months during the no-wash protest in 1980, refers to the 'self-sufficiency (D'Arcy 1981, p.65) of A-Wing[13]. She describes the highly stratified structure of the wing, where the IRA nominates an Officer Commanding (OC) who in turn appoints her own staff amongst fellow inmates : an Entertainments Officer, a Welfare Officer, a Quartermaster and the OC's Second-in-Command (D'Arcy 1981). Any contact with the prison staff (including the governor and medical staff) has to be made through the OC first – who is generally responsible for the 'overall running of the wing' (D'Arcy 1981, p.66). The women's political organisation in Armagh bears a striking – if unsurprising – ressemblance with the early Republican social structures (with their hierarchical structure, and strict internal discipline). While for some women, like Eilís, this collective organising was mandatory to ensure the cohesion of a heterogeneous group of women, others, like Winnie (Corcoran 2006, p.124), considered its function as perpetuating paramilitary power :

> « *It became very militaristic after a while. For instance, we would have fallen-in every morning, and the OC and the Adjutant went around and checked your cells and made sure that it was spotless. (...) It was like being in the army or the navy, with*

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[13] The A-Wing Company IRA was the political prisoners quarter in Maghaberry.

the OC checking that everything was just so. (…) And just before lock-up, the women would stand outside their cells. The OC (…) would have brought everybody to attention, and you were dismissed, and went into your cell for lock-up for the rest of the night. »

Notwithstanding, in the face of routinisation and institutional oppression, the management of time appeared for many women internees as a tool against the disintegration of the individual and collective psyche (Thompson 1991). Some women used their prison time to develop useful political skills and qualifications :

« I used the prison system, my time, to my advantage. I did my exams out of it. I was at school when I was arrested. I finished off my A-Levels in jail, did a couple of other courses, and planned was I was going to do on getting out. (…) Most of the women were very, very focused on what they wanted to do. The whole political awareness – it was amazing to see it develop. » (Eilís in Corcoran 2006, p.125).

Women in Armagh have thus 'used their time' to prepare long-term political and/or intellectual paths forward. As Winnie tells Corcoran (2006 p.125) :

« Republican prisoners (…) decided to use education not as a support thing, but to widen our horizons and to broaden ourselves. By broadening themselves politically and everything they were actually strenghtening what they believed in (…) »

But the weaponisation of education by women was not well received by official authorities, as Kathleen, a Maghaberry internee, recalls :

« They didn't want us to have an education (…). They wanted to have us all contained. Any education they gave us it was like 'let's do a cookery class', 'let's do the needlework class' – the wee, safe sort of subjects. We wanted law and politics. » (Corcoran 2006 p.126).

Education about the history of Ireland, the Republican movement as well as Irish language classes continued well after the dirty protest – and strenghtened the Armagh prisoners' politico-ethnic identity as Republicans. The women in Armagh also recall the high level of solidarity amongst them during confinement, and many, like Maureen, contend that *« the basis of your survival is with the rest of the Republican prisoners »* (Fairweather et al. 1987, p.223). D'Arcy, for instance, demonstrates how, in the face of loneliness, isolation and fear, women political prisoners created a 'new family' within the A Wing :

« The more isolated I became from my comrades outside, the closer I grew to these women and the more we began to understand our problems together. (…) We shared our letters and our photographs and thus became one large family (…). It is very

difficult for those outside to understand this ; and to understand how the isolation of the prisoners on protest reinforces their commitment to the IRA. » (D'Arcy 1981, p.132).

Outside of Armagh, Irish feminists were divided. Mainstream feminists, among which was the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM), were highly critical of nationalism in general, and republicanism in particular, which it held responsible for 'augmenting women's pain' (Aretxaga 1997, p.143). The NIWRM consequently refused to support the dirty strike. On June 17th 1980, Irish journalist and civil rights campaigner Nell McCafferty wrote in *The Irish Times* (McCafferty, 1980) :

> *« (..) the menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh prison smells to high heaven. Shall we (feminists) turn our noses up ? »*

In the article, McCafferty described the choice faced by feminists in relation to Armagh :

> *« Since the suffering of women anywhere, whether self-inflicted or not, cannot be ignored by feminists, then we have a responsibility to respond. The issue then is the nature of our response. »*

In response to McCafferty, some feminists from the NIWRM argued that the Republican movement was hostile to women and perpetuated male domination – to which the Armagh protestors responded :

> *« It is our belief that not only is our plight a feminist issue, but a very fundamental social and human issue. It is a feminist issue insofar as we are women, and the network of this jail is completely geared to male domination. (…) If this is not a feminist issue then we feel that the word feminist needs to be redefined to suit these people who feel that 'feminist' applies to a certain section of women rather than encompassing women everywhere regardless of politically held views. »* (No Wash Protestors, 1980, as quoted in Loughran 1986, p.64).

McCafferty's article clearly encapsulated the gender difference underlying political imprisonment in Northern Ireland. The subsequent public debate around the article, in turn, highlights the complexity and highly controversial nature of sexual oppression - as symbolised by menstrual blood in Armagh. The intersection between colonial and sexual oppression was acknowledged by a small group of Republican, anti-imperalist women from Belfast and Derry, known as Women Against Imperalism (WAI), who were the first to organise pickets in support of the Armagh prisoners (Loughran 1986). Although much can be said about campaigns around Republican women prisoners in Armagh, it is beyond the scope

of our analysis to discuss these campaigns in detail[14]. Suffice to say that Armagh testifies to the rising tensions between Republicans and feminists at the time of the dirty protest. McCafferty sums up the complexity of the Northern Irish situation when she writes than « it is easier to feminise Republicans than to republicanise feminists » (McCafferty 1981, p.90). It also encapsulates rising differences within the feminist movements itself at the time. D'Arcy observes a division between what she labels a 'reformist utilitarian feminism' (1981 p.141) aiming at achieving liberation within the limits of contemporary capitalism, and a more fundamental and radical movement aiming at destroying all forms and manifestations of male domination, extending beyond modern history.

For the women inside, the fact remains that the protests and self-organisation cristallised the destructive potential of anger by providing detainees with political and intellectual direction. This utilisation of anger underscores Armagh women's ability to find agency in the highly restrictive environment that is emprisonment. This form of resistance, in turn, transgresses the very boundaries of the social order. The symbolism of Armagh within Irish culture critallises male domination over the Irish woman in multiple ways. When Mairead Farrell, Margaret Nugent and Mary Doyle went on hunger strike, they called :

> « (…) upon the Irish people to support us in our stand and we especially call upon our sisters in Ireland and throughout the world to stand and be counted with us in the grave days ahead. We are prepared to fast to the death, if necessary, but our love for justice and our country will live forever. »

Their words highlight the interlinkage between colonialism, imperialism and sexual oppression in Northern Ireland – and everywhere across the globe.

Conclusion :

For most women involved in paramilitary violence during the Troubles, gender difference was a political fiction. However, once interned, women had no choice but to engage in a reflection about the politics of gender – or what Artexaga (1997) coins the 'power of sexual difference'. Women fighters and detainees realised that their feminine identity signified exclusion from the realm of decision-making, political influence as well as popular representations. Blaney (2008, p.394 in Moore 2011) sees in the marginalisation of Armagh

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[14] For more on the topic, see Loughran 1986, "Armagh and the Feminist Strategy." *Feminist Review* 23, 59–79

prisoners a reflection of the « anxiety shared by the media, mainstream historical discourse and Irish republicanism provoked by the abjection of the female body ».

However, women paramilitaries, by their very existence, have disrupted hegemonic patriarchal discourses about femininity and masculinity – particularly in the North, where Catholic and Protestant imageries traditionally depicted women as peaceful, conciliatory and devoted to their family. Through the use of violence, women paramilitaries effectively expressed their identity as one that transcends the essential categorisation of 'Mother, Monster, Whore'[15].

Similarly, Republican protestors in Armagh exercised socio-political volition by chosing criminal means as responses (and potential remedies) to the social inequalities stemming from the intersection of class exploitation, racism and sexism. The dirty protest in Armagh constituted a new form of political violence, one that uses the body as a (political) weapon (Aretxaga 1997) ; one that articulates deep feelings in gendered forms.

« *We dedicated our lives to a cause that is supremely more important than they were*. »
Marion Price on hunger strike, in a letter to her mother.

Resisting state violence and engaging in political violence has allowed women to explore new ways of sharpening their socio-political consciousness and exercising agency, even within the highly conservative society that was Northern Ireland at the time of the Troubles. Additionally, as will be discussed below, some women have actively engaged in efforts to end all forms of violence and have cut across community lines to organise around overarching socio-economic issues.

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[15] Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*. 1st ed. London: Zed Books, 2007

3. Women fighting sectarianism

From the late nineteenth century, women in Northern Ireland have been organising collectively to claim their civil and political rights, and to dismantle legislation that restricted their freedoms.

In 1872, Isabella Tod, a Presbyterian from the North, founded the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society, which campaigned for women's right to the parliamentary vote (Kirby 2018). All of Ireland was under British rule at the time, and women from the south and north of the country, together with women from Scotland, Wales and England, collaborated in efforts to reach these common goals. The cooperative aspect of women's engagement in the public sphere carried on well into the XXth century – and it peaked during the Troubles, with women coming together for peace and women working at grass-root level to solve community issues that impacted both sides in the conflict.

I. Direct involvement : Women fighting for Peace

« *Peace won't be the end of the movement – more likely the beginning* »
Monica Patterson, peace campaigner

While some women have considered violence to be justified in the course of the Troubles, others have strongly opposed it in any situation and by anyone. From the early 1960s, a number of individuals from all sides of the conflict, both women and men, have spoken out against all forms of violence, and mobilised around their commitment to peace. Most 'peace groups' had a majority of women membership (Morgan and Fraser 1995). It is widely acknowledge that women from all walks of life have played a central role in the peace process in Northern Ireland, and their involvement has continued on well after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. However, women's activism for peace has been met with its own limits, operating as it was within patriarchal and conservative power structures.

1. Women working for peace : the example of the Peace People

Women's participation in peacebuilding activities in Northern Ireland is a double-edged sword : on the one hand, it challenges the stereotypical portrayal of women as merely

passive, voiceless victims of war ; on the other hand, it seems to reinforce essentialist depictions of women as inherently peaceful and conciliatory. As such, understanding women's involvement in peacebuilding from a feminist perspective involves a recognition of peacebuilding as a response to violent masculine structures and activities (Cockburn 2007).

In Northern Ireland, the sectarian aspect of the conflict has placed identity politics at the center of experiences of violence and war (Craith 2003). Social polarisation around Nationalist/Unionist identities was also rountinely manipulated by political figures to reassert power (Craith 2003). Moreover, women in the North were typically expected to be perpetuating the collective identity of their community. Loyalty to the culture and political allegiance of their community, as opposed to the 'other side' of the conflict, served to maintain women's secondary position in social and economic life (Sales 1997). However, as early as in the 1970s, women from all sides acknowledged identity politics' contribution to the maintenance of violence in the North (Rooney 2000) – and established inter-community dialogues across conflict lines.

Specific peace groups at different levels usually formed after tragic 'incidents' during the conflict. For instance, the Peace People, a group that would later play a vital role in the move towards peace in the North, was created the British Army shot an IRA man dead at the wheel of a vehicle that then veered off the road and killed three children near Finaghy Road North in West Belfast in 1976. Their mother, Anne Maguire, committed suicide a few years later. In the subsequent weeks, groups of people organised group prayers near the site of the incident, and local women went from door to door with a petition to end paramilitary violence (Peace People 2013, Smithey 2017), which collected 6000 signatures by the following evening (Deutsch 1977). Mairead Corrigan (Anne Maguire's sister) was interviewed by the BBC after the tragedy :

> *« I blame maybe one percent of our community of people who are so misguided and misled and I say to them 'please stop getting the young ones doing things that they don't even want to do. Please stop the violence, people can't take anymore, it's just too much. I blame the Provisional IRA, I blame all men of violence. People who say they're Christians yet they can't practice what God said, love one and other and forgive and forget."* (BBC News, 2016).

A rally was organised the following day by Betty Williams, a woman from West Belfast who had witnessed the incident. The march reportedly drew ten to fifteen thousand women from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds (McKeown 1984). A few days after the tragedy,

Corrigan and Williams joined forces and created a group called Women for Peace. Interestingly, the two women later renamed the group Peace People for fear that it would be seen as a feminist movement – which illustrates the highly conservative forces at play within Northern Irish society at the time, as well as the internalised bias of some Northern Irish women. Later joined by Ciaran McKeown (Northern Ireland correspondent for the Irish Press Group), they became the leader of the Peace People, a broad organisation that operated across Northern Ireland. Within the first 6 months of its creation, the organisation reported a 70 percent drop in the rate of violence (Peace People 2013). That same year, the Peace People created the Rally Programme, with the goal of « structuring an ongoing movement to deal with the root causes of conflict » (Peace People 2013), and campaigned for the end to all violence in Northern Ireland. Their campaigns consisted in organising street groups as well as coordinating marches which attracted thousands onto the streets to demand the cessation of violence. The second march, organised in a protestant area of Belfast, attracted around 50,000 participants, both Catholics and Protestants (Poole and Thompson 2020). Williams and Corrigan deliberately kept the movement apolitical – they refused to meet politicians, avoided political statements and didn't allow political signs and banners at the marches. Both women were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work in 1977, although the movement eventually collapsed in 1980. The Peace People represent what some sociologists call a « transformationist » movement (Smithey 2017, p.205). They called for a transformation of the sectarian society that was Northern Ireland at the time, through a non-violent programme aimed at the creation of a post-sectarian identity and post-sectarian political system (Smithey 2015, PeacePeople 1976). However, the principled (and revolutionary) non-violence advocated by the Peace People clashed with the existing cultural and ideological models that many had internalised in Northern Ireland (Smithey 2011). Some scholars have later argued that their engagement against the everyday politics of violence and against polarised collective identities was « too great a departure » (Smithey 2017) from the lived habitus of the majority of people in the North. The first movement participants were almost exclusively female (McKeown 1984) – so much so that the press soon labelled the group 'the women's movement' (Walker 1976). While the movement certainly succeeded in acting outside of traditional power structures and gaining wide-scale support across sectarian lines for an end of violence, some have noted that the Peace People's campaign was largely legitimated by women's traditional concerns with the safety and welfare of their family (Morgan and Fraser 1995). Betty Williams, when interviewed about the nature of the Peace People as a collective, said that :

> *« This is not an organisation, it is just a collection of mothers from the areas affected »* (herstory.ie)

Moreover, the three leaders, especially Corrigan and Williams, frequently drew on Christian theology and symbolism to stress the importance of non-violence. Corrigan repeatedly referred to her Catholic faith in the regular column she wrote for the movement newsletter, Peace by Peace (*Peace By Peace*, 1976-1978). This discursive strategy shows the persistence of Christian imagery in the minds of the people in Northern Ireland, and more particularly on women, who mobilised their status as 'protectors' and 'nurturers' to organise for peace in the region. Notwithstanding, it is unsurprising that many of these initiatives were led by women ; clearly, they were the ones who coped with much of the hardship brought about by sectarianism and violence, while being excluded and marginalised in higher level activities that influenced the level of political violence in the region. As Eileen Evason, who was involved with the Peace Movement from its early days, writes :

> *« When dominant organisations and institutions are either incapable or unwilling to seek change it is hardly surprising that frustrated outsiders will in the right conditions come together in a new movement – and this is what seemed to be happening in August 1976. »* (Evason 1977, p.110).

Throughout the 1980s, a considerable amount of other peace-related groups operated at a smaller scale and less publicly across Northern Ireland, most with a large majority of women members[16] (Morgan 1995) – so much so that it would not be an overstatement to conclude that it was women who took the first steps into peace efforts during the Troubles (McCoy 2000). During the course of the 1980s, however, popular support for peace organisations and peace demonstrations faded considerably (Kim 2019, Smithey 2017).

The success and rapid downfall of the Peace People and other peace movements across NI provides an invaluable example of the strength and weaknesses of women's actions in the late XXth century. In the next section of my analysis, I will attempt to understand the limited success of these women-led initiatives at the time of the conflict.

2. Revolutionary non-violence against the backdrop of Northern Irish culture

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[16] For an inclusive account of these movements, see Poole and Thompson, « Northern Ireland Peace movements », Alpha History, 2020

Peace groups across Northern Ireland were able to mobilise mass action in support of the cessation of violence, but public support usually lasted for only brief periods of time (Morgan and Fraser 1995). It proved extremely difficult for these organisations to translate the momentum into sustained, long-term political action. While it was relatively easy to arouse public emotion against violence – particularly after tragedies – it was much harder to shape this response into a coherent political and social programme. At the time of the conflict, some have argued that it was impossible to translate the surge of public emotion into agreed policies that could produce social change in the North (Rooney 1991). In a region where sectarian lines run deep within society, it was a rather gruelling task for any movements to break into institutional power structures in order to influence socio-political change.   The rise and fall of the Peace People within four years certainly illustrates the challenges faced by women in interacting with existing formal power structures in Northern Ireland – particularly when the policies aim at influencing male-dominated structures.

Peace groups and initiatives like the Peace People did not only put forward a set of political strategies toward a political goal – they offered a reinvention of Northern Ireland's entire political structure and 'human relations' (Smithey 2017, p.215). The paradox of peace movements lay in the attractiveness of their non-violent principles for the war-weary population of the North, but also in their failure to prove sustainable, precisely because their praxis did not align with the culture and experience of the citizens in the region. For one thing, these groups drew support from a divided constituency, which conflicted with the very ideology of the movements. McAdam et al. (1988) have argued that the greater the number of cross-cutting solidarities in a movement, the less likely it is that the group will be able to sustain success. Moreover, the revolutionary non-violent discourse of peace movements proved incomprehensible to a significant part of their potential constituency. Supporters and participants continually experienced an inconsistency between their daily experiences of the conflict and the official non-violent stance of the movements. In a society where conflict had polarised ethnocultural identities, movements that called for a realignment of the collective *psyche*, identities, and social structures are rarely successful (Smithey 2017). The introduction of new models of belonging and understanding can be perceived as too radical in a society where national and cultural self-identification plays a crucial role in daily experiences of conflict.

Additionally, the women of the peace movements in the North encountered tremendous resistance when negotiating within traditional, male power structures – which obstruct and marginalise women's initiatives attempting to work through new channels.

In 1996, in light of impending multi-party talks in the North, some women lamented the lack of female representation in Northern Irish politics. Eileen Weir, a woman volunteering at the Shankill Women's Centre in Belfast, stated :

> *« I should not be saying I want round the table – the men round the table should be saying 'where's the women ?' »* (herstory.ie)

In April of that same year, a meeting was held that gathered different women's groups from across the region, and led to the creation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition – which would later take two constituency seats at the Northern Irish Assembly (herstory.ie). An analysis of women-led political movements across Northern Ireland is beyond the scope of this paper. However it should be noted that, while it has been women who have taken the strain of the hardships caused by the conflict and the politico-economic problems of the North, political activism by women in the region has been faced with the deeply conservative and oppressive norms of their time. The equally conservative Catholic and Protestant churches expected women to stay away from the public forum and fulfill their role as mothers and wives. Political parties, unions and all other groups and institutions were overwhelmingly male-dominated. Mary Nelis, an activist from Derry, sums up the position many Northern Irish found themselves in during the Troubles (Evason 1991, p.14) :

> *« Housebound, childbound, workbound, their energies diverted into producing children and shirts, the women of Derry were content to leave the politics to the powermen, their souls to the church and their bodies to their husbands. »*

The inner « consciousness-raising » of feminist perception was therefore not the norm in Northern Ireland, where external forces (such as the Churches and paramilitary groups) set the pace for political and social developments (Kilmurray 1987).

Overall, while the story of women's involvement in peace and reconciliation efforts in the North is one of true courage, commitment and achievement, it collided with the official and unofficial power structures governing Northern Irish society during the Troubles. It is unsurprising, therefore, that during the 1980s many women activists shifted their activites to grass-root activities such as cross-community development schemes that focused on specific localities or cross-community issues. Although these initiatives remained outside the official power structures, they were increasingly successful in establishing dialogue between women from different ethno-national backgrounds.

II. Cross-community work : recognition of a shared experience

'There was a big risk in doing cross-community work. You were threatened but when you get a group of very strong women together who have a real aim in life, there's very little that stops them, even a threat.' – May Blood

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Although working-class grievances were starting to be heard across Northern Ireland by the mid-seventies, issues of specific concern to women were still met with hostility by political parties across the spectrum, who either deemed them as irrelevant or useless distractions from more pressing matters (Kilmurray 1987, Fairweather et al 1987).

Yet women formed the backbone of grass-root community action from the early 1970s. As a response to the feminist-inspired initiatives of the 1970s, women across community lines started to organise collectively around issues that related to their position in society. A number of cross-section organisations were set up, such as the Northern Ireland Abortion Campaign, the Falls Women's Centre, the Rape Crisis Centre and Crescent Day-Care Groups (a women's self-help health group). These groups were offered advice and expertise from The Belfast Women's Centre and The Women's Education Project (Kilmurray 1987). However, as Wilson (1977) observes, militancy over specific issues of concern did not necessarily lead to heightened overall political awareness. To a large extent, involvement by women in the community was driven by the need for support and/or service provision, rather than the need to engage in the political and ideological aims of feminist movements across the region.

Notwithstanding, women from across community lines in the North did come together in recognition of similar experience – and managed to achieve some remarkable victories.

1. Collective action within the community

Because women's actions had a limited impact on the formal power structures of political life in Northern Ireland, from the early days of the conflict women focused on in community action – or what some have, perhaps scornfully, called « second-level » political activity. Such initiatives were not specifically directed at solving the ongoing constitutional issue in the North, but they had a significant and impactful community relations dimension. A large number of small and medium-scale community organisations were created from the early

1970s, covering a large spectrum in terms of locality, age, class and membership (Morgan 1995). What McLaughlin (1993 in Morgan 1995) calls 'informal care' was provided in relation to women's interests : these included (but were not limited to) abortion, rape, teenage pregnancy and domestic violence. Local community groups regularly campaigned for the improvement of services and facilities (Evason 1987, Morgan 1995).

One of the most far-reaching actions born from cross-community work was the Women's Information Day. The initiative was conceived in 1980 when four community workers from Belfast decided to set up a space where women they had been working with in different communities could come together. During the early years, about 30 women from both sides of the divide came together. In the following year, the initiative drew over 300 women together (Kilmurray 1987). One of the organisers told Kelly (1985) :

> *« The Day was called Information Day, acknowledging the fact that information is a key ingredient for any individual or group in the process of gaining confidence, or getting things done, or simply being heard. It is a source of power and especially so for women who are so often isolatd in their homes, where information is much harder to acquire. »*

During this day, women met to discuss issues of particular concern to them – including healthcare, childcare, social security cuts, rent increases etc. (Kilmurray 1987). As such, women involved in this initiative were the crossing community divides and setting their own agenda, based on their personal everyday needs (whether social or economic). It seems that the de-politisation of such issues was successful, in light of the rapid expansion of tenant and cross-community groups from the early 1970s, as well as the significant achievements of women involved in such work. For instance, Evason (1991) recalls that women led some of the most successful housing campaigns of the late 1970s[17]. Women across the community were also involved in a number of initiatives concerning the high levels of poverty in the North (Evason 1991).

Another examplary illustration of women's collaboration across the divide lies in the establishment of the Women's Support Network (WSN) in Belfast in 1990. After Belfast City Council withdrew funds from the Falls Women's centre, arguing that its staff and users were Republicans (Sales 1997) all women centres from Belfast came together to criticise the decision for being 'sectarian' (Kim 2019, p.468). A press conference about the Council's decision led to the formation of the WSN, which drew women from both sides of the conflict

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[17] Two of these campaigns relate to the demolition of flats in Turf Lodge (West Belfast) and the demolition of the Divis flats in Belfast (Evason 1991).

together (Cockburn 1998). However, when the WSN hosted Irish President Mary Robinson in 1997, some loyalists met the visit with hostility and the women's centre in a loyalist area which Robinson visited was attacked multiple times (McCoy 2000). While this demonstrates that women's cross-community cooperation was not without danger, political violence and threats did not impede trans-community dialogue for women who chose to focus on the « practical issues on which women can agree » (Sales 1997 p.193). Such issues were not hard to find. Northern Ireland was far behind the United Kingdom in relation to women's rights at the time of the Troubles. Legislation on divorce was outdated, abortion was illegal, and discrimination in education, employment and women versus men's salaries was considerable (Buckley and Lorgan 1983). Notwithstanding, as pressing as these issues were, it seems that gender alone proved insufficient for the development of a sustainable political program in the North - as the split in the Women's Rights Movement illustrates (Roulston 1989). Shortly after its creation, the Movement split over 'political disagreements' (Aretxaga 1995) and into a multiplicity of collectives focussed on diversified issues. Evidence of the extent to which women were battling against male-dominated structures against the backdrop of deeply-embedded sectarian and ethno-national divides which swamped alternative propositions for the North.

So while across Northern Ireland, the recognition of a shared experience, and the impact of conflict on the lives of women led to the development of strong links across sectarian divides, and while many volunteers involved in cross-community work came to question the relevance of sectarian identities and norms in the daily experience of women's lives, cross-community work eventually hit the limits of inter-community relations in Northern Ireland, on multiple levels.

2. The limits of inter-community relations in the North

Women were prominent in inter-community initiatives across the North - they certainly had crossed the Nationalist/Unionist, Catholic/Protestant divides long before the Peace Process of 1998. In the face of overarching issues like poverty and violence, their position was one of respect rather than erasure of political difference(s) in favour of unity. However, their involvement remained outside the realm of official power and gained no support from Churches, governments or political parties (Morgan 1995). Moreover, the pervasive

influence of both Churches created much hostility about inter-community initiatives (McWilliams 1991).

Statistics show that many women in Northern Ireland got involved and joined organisation, but these were overwhelmingly related to Church activities and charity work (Morgan and Fraser 1995). Such memberships ran along intra-community lines, partly because of different Church memberships and partly because they were operating with the help of informal networks. In fact, church groups and activities were usually the only spaces where women could meet, talk and work with other women from outside their close circles of family and friends. As such, there was an opportunity to use these platforms to better reach across the community divide. However, some groups viewed inter-Church contact as undesirable, and prevented women from etablishing links with their peers from the 'other side' (Morgan and Fraser 1995). Churches were also seen by the Northern Irish authorities as safe havens for grants – which effectively allowed them to maintain a high degree of control over community development, training activities and initiatives (Evason 1991). Circumverting the Churches' influence on community programmes (for instance, in regards to the courses offered to women) was a major challenge for many women involved in grass-root inter-community work during the Troubles.

Moreover, given that membership largely relied on informal links of friendship, it proved difficult to improve cross-community contact in a society so deeply segregated along the lines of religion and ethno-national identities.

Evason (1977) has stressed the importance of geographical segregation in impeding inter-community dialogue. In Northern Ireland, where the two communities had 'retreated from each other' (1977, p.110) to live in areas largely dominated by one group, local and community-based projects would usually serve one 'side' of the population –because such projects were simply not large, or ambitious, enough to encompass more, and because of the control exerted by those with purse rings (as described above).

In addition, it is important to note that while women have clearly been to the forefront of inter-community contact in the North, and this since well before the start of the Peace Process, it does not necessarily follow that women have a greater committment to ending sectarianism and physical violence than men. Studies on women's attitudes towards community relations in the North have shown that they do not differ from those of the men, and O'Donnell (1977) even found that women had more negative stereotypes than men about the opposing « group ». This can be explained by a combination of several factors. Firstly, Northern Irish women were less present in the public sphere than men ; perhaps they were

then less likely to witness improvements in overall cross-community relations in the region. Secondly, women were more sensitive to the influence of religion on their beliefs and thinking : the Churches' conservatism and its defence of existing values had a strong impact on women's attitudes towards community relations during the Troubles.

That said, women's involvement in cross-community work in the North certainly shows that they define, frame and operate peace-making in a different way than men. As early as the 1970s, women were actively promoting new paths for inter-community conversations about Northern Ireland's political future.

Conclusion :

Feminist scholars describe several characteristics that women's peacebuilding activities have in common. Firstly, these activities highlight the highly gendered nature of war and political violence when striving for gender equality societies affected by conflict. Secondly, women's peacebuilding initiatives challenge institutionalised, structural violence through the use of radical and revolutionary non-violence. Finally, it is transversal and trans-national, creating and maintaining relationships and cooperation among women from different sides of conflict (Cockburn 2007; Brock-Utne 1989).

In Northern Ireland, peacebuilding and inter-community efforts by women were among the earliest endeavours to oppose the violent structures of the Northern Irish conflict-affected society, and to create transversal dialogue, collaboration and solidarity well beyond ethno-national identity lines.

Evason (1991, p.57), writes about the women's movement(s) in Northern Ireland :

> *« Why are feminists looking (for a women's movement) when there seem to be so many groups and centres working away ? The level of activity is, and has long been, remarkable when compared with any other area with a similarly small population. »*

These peacebuilding and inter-community efforts are of major importance in a conflicted society such as Northern Ireland. On the one hand, it allows women to effectively challenge the attitudes of Churches, political parties, governments and informal groups in relation to their place within society. On the other hand, it provides a space for accepting 'the other'

through a mutual understanding of a shared experience : one of a violent, highly oppressive society.

> *« The first experience of liberating change for many women, and the first step of revolutionary change for women as a whole, is making contact with others outside the home, on the basis of some shared problem. »* (Cockburn 1992 in Kilmurray 1987, p.183).

CONCLUSION:

Armed conflict is ordinarily defined as a male preserve. Traditional understandings of war depict men as defenders of the Nation, whereas women are relegated into secondary support tasks and/or or domestic tasks as wives and mothers of fighters. In Northern Ireland, the issue of self-determination against the backdrop of British colonialism is a feminist issue (Ryan 1997) inasmuch as women have experienced some of the harshest manifestations of the ethnic conflict – yet, women's individual and collective reactions to the Troubles have seldom captured the imagination of scholars. An analysis of women's responses to physical and institutional violence in terms of resistance deconstructs stereotypical discourses that dichotomise gendered experiences of war in terms of victim/agent. Gender roles in wartime are more complex and varied, and women have played a crucial role in both the perpetuation and settlement of the Northern Irish Troubles. It should be without doubt by now that to describe them merely as « peacemakers » says very little about the reality of women's attitudes during the conflict.

Chapter 1 of this paper highlights women's contributions to the reduction of physical, structural and cultural violence and seggregation in the North. Women from all sides of the conflict were able to develop new tools for the resolution of ethnic conflict through their involvement in community action and peacebuilding activities from the early days of the Troubles. These efforts, as we have seen, were constrained by the highly patriarchal and conservative power structures in place at the time. As such, women's ability to sustain new forms of social relationships has been met with long-lasting resistance from both sides of the conflict – yet women in the North have still proved their strength and determination by collectively organising around non-violence and overarching women-related issues, in the face of the highly conservative local ideologies. Cross-community and peacebuilding efforts have led many women to question the relevance of ethnic conflict in their own oppression. Their involvement outside an inner family/friend circle has fostered their sense of self and provided many women with new pathways to finding their own voice in the midst of physical and cultural violence. Women's involvement in peacemaking and transversal community action testifies to the delicate yet crucial balance at the heart of women's everyday lives during the Troubles : namely, that between sameness (residing in gender and class discrimination) and difference (residing in ethno-national identities). The key to women

expressing agency outside of the private sphere resides in their acknowledgement that any collective political action has to move past difference and into a common engagement based on the recognition of a shared experience. In doing so, women have created structures which enabled them to have some degree of control and agency over their daily lives.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of women's resistance to different forms of State violence during the Troubles. As the State inserted itself into their lives in concrete forms, women grew conscious of the power relations governing Northern Irish society at the time. For many in the North, the structural and physical violence of the conflict led to new forms of resistance and political awareness. In the face of state violence, intimidation and harassment, women developed methods of resistance that either strengten stereotypical gender paradigms or open up spaces for the construction of new ones. Athough women were resisting violence within a highly patriarcal and oppressive framework, their actions were revolutionary inasmuch as they effectively reverted the male gaze of the coloniser by acting outside of patriarcal expectations. State violence has paradoxically fostered women's sense of self and political awareness in the North. From the early days of the 1970'scurfew to the 1998 Peace Process, political violence has transformed women's secondary position as caregivers and passive agents. Whether they were taking to the streets in protest of British policy, banging lids and blowing whistles to protect their communities, or actively disrupting house raids, interrogations and searches, the conflict shaped women's reactions into specific forms of social protest. Women have thus reacted to state violence by creating new forums for expressing activism and agency, through the use of public defiance and by manipulating their own bodies as weapons of war. Such gender-bending practices show that women retaliated against the invasion of their bodily spaces and communities by destabilising normative gender discourses. This is all the more impressive considering the high degree of conservatism underlying institutional and relational power in Northern Ireland. Moving beyond the Catholic and Protestant imagery of the «passive woman », the « weeping mother », women across the political and religious spectrum reacted to state violence by shrugged off the regulatory forces that confined them to the domestic, private spheres.

Chapter 3 of this paper shows that the gendered assumptions permeating scholar's works on armed conflict only account for part of the reality of women's relationship to political violence. Far from being more conciliatory and opposed to violence than their male counterparts, women from both sides of the conflict have effectively used violence to express political and cultural belongings. Women's use of violence in the case of the Troubles illustrates their own relationship to gender in multiple ways. Most women engaged in

paramilitary violence did not consider gender as more than political fiction. The very existence of women paramilitaries represents a disruption of hegemonic discourses about gender and sexuality. Women's involvement in physical violence in Northern Ireland transcended the traditional boundaries that conservative forces had carved out for them – as women expressed new identities as fighters and heroines, beyond their roles as mothers, daughters and wives. In parallel, the experience of internment raised many prisoners' gender awareness as internees were directly confronted with the patriarcal, oppressive institutional norms of imprisonment in the North. In response to the gendered forms of punishment they were facing in Armagh and, later, Maghaberry jails, women used their femininity as a weapon of political violence. The dirty protest and the internal organisation of the political prisoner wing in Armagh testifies to women's ability to articulate deep feelings and exercise socio-political agency through unconventional and gendered modes of expression.

The violence of the Troubles engendered intense and diverse reactions from women across the ethnic divide. While some women have made a valuable contribution to the reduction of violence in the region by stepping into the public domain and crossing community lines, others have reacted to violence by actively resisting it in gendered ways. Some women directly participated in the conflict by means of physical violence and protests. This paper demonstrates the wide range of women's expressions of agency during the conflict. If anything, these differences show the extent to which women's experiences of and responses to armed conflict are inextricably linked to issues of class, ethno-cultural belongings, political persuasion and sexuality. And it is reasonable to suggest that conflict opens up new spaces where women are able to transgress conservative norms and question their own relationship to political activism.

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