

# The Prison Journal

## Menstruation as a Weapon of War – The Politics of the Bleeding Body for Women on Political Protest at Armagh Prison Northern Ireland.

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Abstract:	<p>The aim of this article is to draw on the voices of women political prisoners who were detained at Armagh gaol during the period of the Troubles or the Conflict in Northern Ireland, as it is also referred to. It will focus on women who undertook an extraordinary form of protest against the prison authorities and the British government. To punish the women for the events that took place on February 7th 1980, the women were prevented from leaving their cells by the prison officers either to wash or to use the toilets, which resulted in the women living in the midst of their own dirt, body waste and adding to the protest menstrual blood. This article draws on 28 qualitative interviews with women who had experienced imprisonment and who were on the No Wash protest at Armagh prison during the 1980s. Ethical approval was obtained from Queen's University, Belfast and is part of larger study examining the experiences of women and male ex-combatants/volunteers in the Irish Republican Army.</p>

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6 were detained at Armagh gaol during the period of the Troubles or the Conflict in  
7 Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>, as it is also referred to. It will focus on women who undertook an  
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17 Republican Army.  
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27 In 1980 the men were joined by their female comrades who remained on the No  
28 Wash protest till December of the same year. Unlike the hunger strike on which the  
29 prisoners embarked on in 1981, the Dirty Protest had no precedent in the existing  
30 political culture.  
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35 The article will address how women's bodies were utilised and deployed as a  
36 weapon of war and will question why women's involvement in the No Wash protest  
37 led to a reaction that was gendered differentiated.  
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41 Much has been written about strategies adopted by prisoners to cope with the  
42 routine of incarceration, to retain personal dignity and to resist brutalisation (see  
43 Bosworth, 1999). Bosworth and Carrabine (2001:501) have pointed out that 'prison  
44 life is characterised by ongoing negotiations of power'. Although Goffman (1961:  
45 42) didn't distinguish between political prisoners and 'ordinary decent criminals', he  
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50 <sup>1</sup>The use of the term Conflict rather 'The Troubles' will be used to refer to the period of armed conflict  
51 involving State and non-state groups. The Conflict involved the suspension of normal powers of law  
52 enforcement, the due process of the law, and the internment and incarceration of politically-affiliated  
53 prisoners. Eventual ceasefires and the initiation of the Peace Process led to the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast)  
54 Agreement and political devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The British and Irish Governments,  
55 established a commitment to democratic and peaceful means of resolving political issues. The term denotes  
56 the protracted and symbolic nature of the 'long war'.

57 <sup>2</sup> In this book all the names of the ex-combatants and any identifying variables have been changed in  
58 agreement with the participants of the study unless they have chosen otherwise.  
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3 wrote that prisoners occupy the lowest rung in 'echelon' society. He illustrated their  
4 lack of power by pointing out that any prison officer, at any time can inflict social  
5 harm and instigate disciplinary procedures. Prisoners, particularly political prisoners,  
6 relate incidents of extreme cruelty, violence and threatening isolation while  
7 reflecting that whatever the assault on the body or the restriction on movement,  
8 their freedom to think, reason and project remain intact (see McKeown, 2001). The  
9 conscious rejection of victimhood, the refusal to be cowed and the commitment to  
10 question and disobey authority together contribute to an often formidable,  
11 oppositional and collectivised force. Yet the fear and reality of physical harm and  
12 the awareness of the destructive potential of long periods in isolation diminished  
13 and, occasionally, destroyed self-esteem (see Moore and Scraton, 2014; Scraton  
14 1987, Scraton and McCulloch, 2009).

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24 The use of excreta and menstruation as a weapon of resistance was not, however,  
25 the only bodily weapon available to the prisoners. The Dirty Protest was by any  
26 standard of political culture, and certainly by that of Ireland, an unusual political  
27 action for women to participate in. However, the British national press, upon visiting  
28 Long Kesh and the men on the No Wash protest for the first time, called it: 'the most  
29 bizarre protest by prisoners in revolt against their gaolers' and 'self-inflicted  
30 degradation' (Guardian and Daily Telegraph, March 16<sup>th</sup> 1979). It was an  
31 incomprehensible act to the general public as it was to prison officers and  
32 government administration. The No Wash protest failed to attract international  
33 sympathy. Amnesty international, for example, concluded upon examination of the  
34 case that the prisoners' conditions were self-inflicted<sup>3</sup>. The questionable character of  
35 the violent searches was voiced by the British press. The British National Union of  
36 Students with a membership of 1.2 million positioned itself against giving political  
37 status to prisoners. Yet they voted to organise a national campaign 'against the  
38 inhuman treatment of women prisoners in Armagh jail' (Hodges, The Times, March  
39 19<sup>th</sup>, 1980, 3). However, the close vote - 296 against 214 – hinted at the polemical  
40 and ambivalent quality of the dirty protest outside of Ireland. The Labour Party also  
41 expressed concern about reports: 'that women in Armagh jail were being attended  
42 by male wardens, were locked up for 23 hours a day and were being denied  
43 proper sanitary and medical facilities' going on to say 'while the national executive

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58 <sup>3</sup> Amnesty International Report on Long-Kesh 1977.

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3 should oppose terrorism, it should also oppose repression and torture in Northern  
4 Ireland' (The Times, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1980, 2).  
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7 The No Wash protest provoked an inexpressible level of horror and during this  
8 period a rising spiral of violence inside and outside of the jails became more  
9 marked. If the men's No Wash protest was incomprehensible, for women it was  
10 unthinkable, generating in many men, even among the ranks of supporting  
11 Republicans, reactions of denial. It was no doubt a form of warfare, a violent contest  
12 of power, as Feldman (1991) has noted. But why this form and not another?  
13 Excrement was used as a direct critique of the state's pretensions of homogenising  
14 the women and the 'civilising process' happening within the prisons<sup>4</sup>. As Elias  
15 (1998) has argued, there is a link between the development of manners, and  
16 'toilette etiquette' regarding the removal of bodily functions from a private to a visible  
17 public space (Edwards and McKie, 1996) and the evolution of the modern State. As  
18 in other closed institutions, in a context of limited options, prisoners fell back on  
19 using their own waste products as symbolic weapons against the assumed  
20 civilisation of the prison authorities and that of the British state.  
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31 As Aretxaga (1995: 135) suggests, the image of the prisoners living amongst their  
32 own excrement, menstrual blood and bloodied sanitary towels created an image of  
33 the 'other', the 'uncivilised', the fluid, leaky, unruly deviant female body, of which  
34 their bodies became dangerous, dirty and in need of control. In the women's  
35 accounts this movement from the hidden to public was not one of choice but became  
36 interpolated as the movement away from the 'civilising process' (Elias, 1978; 1982).  
37 While menstruation is an element of women's lives, it remains hidden, and not  
38 talked about (Scambler and Scambler, 1993). Menstrual blood was no longer a  
39 marginal filthy substance but was central to political protest, politicising their  
40 existence in prison.  
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52 <sup>4</sup> Such usage of excrement as a symbolic critique of the state has a considerable antecedence in Irish political  
53 writing. For example, in Part Four of Gulliver's Travels in 'A voyage to the country of the Houyhnhnms'  
54 Gulliver encounters the Yahoos who use excrement as an instrument of self-expression and aggression,  
55 shooting excreta at Gulliver after he arrives. In the subsequent narrative, however, Swift makes it clear that  
56 the civilised humans are actually nastier than the savage Yahoos. The excreta flung at Gulliver represented  
57 a direct challenge to the self-image of imperialism as civilised and benign (see Brown 1959, Swift, 1967)  
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3 Socialised to see menstruation as 'unpleasant' and in some cultures as 'unclean' and  
4 polluting (Weidegger, 1975), the discourse of dirt was used to support anti-catholic  
5 sentiments. Although, McEvoy, (2001:243), focuses on the experiences of male  
6 Republicans at Long Kesh, his argument can be applied to how the women of  
7 Armagh on the No Wash protest was constructed in that 'it resonated with sectarian  
8 anti-Catholic discourses concerning dirtiness and immorality' (2001:245). Peter  
9 Robinson, Deputy leader of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, wrote in a  
10 Democratic Unionist Party pamphlet published at the time stating 'if cleanliness is  
11 next to Godliness, then to whom are these men [or women] close?' (Robinson  
12 1981:40)<sup>5</sup>.

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20 The first sentence in McCafferty's Irish Times article reads, 'There is menstrual  
21 blood on the walls of Armagh prison in Northern Ireland'. Prisoner Shirley Devlin, a  
22 Republican from Newington who was twenty years old when the No Wash protest  
23 began in Armagh, explained this particular issue: 'A fee extra towels a month  
24 would help to combat the risk of infection. But no. Criminalisation and sanitary  
25 towels go together. Criminal means clean. Political means dirty, that is what they try  
26 to tell us' 91981,6).

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33 By rationing the number of sanitary towels allowed to each woman (some reports  
34 indicated that they were allowed a maximum of two per day), the male-dominated  
35 prison system was abusing the prisoners in an exclusively female way. As  
36 Fairweather *et al* note: 'The fact that they had to sit in their own menstrual blood  
37 amid excreta and urine did not concern the prison authorities' (1984:222). Their sole  
38 objective was to weaken these women and force them off the protest.

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44 As the following statements reveal:

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If these women had chosen to submit to the prison system - to accept whole-  
heartedly its rules, regulations and accompanying abuse - then like the women  
serving time for robbery, assault or other non-republican crimes, republican women  
would have had access to all the sanitary products they needed. Instead, these

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson goes on to reproduce a poem from anonymous woman, whom he states has been personally affected by Republican violence: 'Like animals, they live, But that's their way,... existing in their filthy degradation day by day.... And those who protest the loudest, shout aloud.... the world can weep for the H Blocks, I will weep for you'.

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3 women were subjecting themselves to sterility and even death by participating in  
4 the Dirty Protest (McCafferty 1981:13).

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6 Many women were concerned about the long term effects as D'Archy (1981: 25)  
7 notes:

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9 'I was most scared about possible vaginal infections, which quite a few suffered  
10 from. We never changed our knickers or jeans, but one had to have some  
11 protection there. Most of the women wore sanitary towels but there were no  
12 sanitary belts, so much of the time in the exercise was spent in furtively hitching  
13 the towels into place out of view of the TV monitors. The problem of not washing  
14 during menstruation was solved by changing the tampax much more frequently  
15 than one would outside. ... In the beginning you could get as many sanitary towels  
16 and tampax as you wanted. But then nurses came round and informed us that we  
17 were going to get them only on the first day of the month, and you had to choose  
18 between tampax and towels'.

19  
20 AW And did the screws actually provide sanitary towels and tampons?

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22 S When they felt like it.

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24 AW Did you have to ask, or did you....?

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26 S Yes, yes you had to ask. It depended on who was on and even as to how  
27 many they give you. They just would have thrown them into the cell, without  
28 any cellophane. Sometimes, that all depended on who was there at the time  
29 and that's when we thought we would have picked up infections and stuff.  
30 Funnily enough there were very few infections. There were some, but not as  
31 much as we thought was going to happen'.

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33 But one which leads to a different type of pain suffering and torment:

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35 B: 'Being on your period was one of the hardest times because it's such a  
36 private and personal thing. They would allow us towels. We were allowed  
37 something like five or six towels for the duration, regardless of what your  
38 period was like, and we just carried on as usual'.

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49 The involvement of women in the No Wash protest for the first time propelled  
50 women volunteers into the popular consciousness of the international community,  
51 even though they participated and died in armed operations and had been  
52 imprisoned in rising numbers since 1972. As news filtered to the outside world, the  
53 image of cells smeared with excrement and menstrual blood, used sanitary towels  
54 left-over food, the question had to be asked: Who are these women and how did  
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3 they get there? Mairéad Farrell, leader of the women prisoners, described in a letter  
4 smuggled out the fetid and squalid conditions they were forced to live in:  
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7 'The stench of urine and excrement clings to the cells and our bodies. No  
8 longer can we empty the pots of urine and excrement out the window, as  
9 the male screws [guards] have boarded them up. Little light or air  
10 penetrates the thick boarding. The electric light has to be kept constantly  
11 on in the cells; the other option is to see out the window; our only view is  
12 the wall of excreta. The spy-holes are locked so they can only be open by  
13 the screws to look in. Sanitary towels are thrown into us without wrapping.  
14 We are not permitted paper bags or such like so they lie in the dirt until  
15 used. For twenty-three hours a day we lie in these cells'<sup>6</sup>.  
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21 As the women rewrote the contours of the cell, The No Wash protest simultaneously  
22 rewrote their naked bodies with a new and repellent surface of resistance. The  
23 faecal cell, which the prison officers tended to avoid and mainly entered to inflict fear  
24 and terror, also interrupted the women's compulsory invisibility. In response to the  
25 deteriorating conditions the prison officers distanced themselves from the polluting  
26 environment of the faeces, smell, urine, food and sanitary towels. Menstrual blood, in  
27 many ways was seen as the ultimate form of danger and in turn dirt, and it was  
28 these ideas of being contaminated (see Douglas, 1966) that was particularly useful  
29 in warding off unwanted trespassers. D'Arcy (1981) observes the effect that the  
30 No Wash protest had on the female prison officers. She states: 'The more asexual  
31 we became with our loose-fitting jeans and streaks of dirt-running down our faces,  
32 the more feminine they became, with their elaborate coiffures, their waists nipped  
33 in tightly, great whiffs of perfume choking our nostrils every time we left our cells  
34 (D'Archy, 1981). Aretxaga, states that 'prison officers felt defiled coming into  
35 contact with the prisoners. As the women looked increasingly dirty, the guards tried  
36 to counteract defilement by increasing care in making themselves up and having  
37 their hair done' (1997: 136). In the women's prison of Armagh officers wore masks,  
38 insulating suits, and rubber boots that shielded them from the polluting conditions  
39 of the prisoners' wing that protected them from the living conditions of the  
40 prisoners (Aretxaga, 1997:136). This reaction to the perception of contamination  
41 was heightened by the guards' own use of blood to induce fear among prisoners.  
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58 <sup>6</sup> Republican News, February 23, 1980; Report by Women Against Imperialism, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1980, p. 27.  
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3 Feldman describes an apparently common practice in Long Kesh in which blood is  
4 used as a visual referent to pain, torture and violence.  
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7 'The PIRA [Provisional Irish Republican Army] captives move from the parade of  
8 mutilation and mob violence [interrogation and examination] with its attendant  
9 scenes of weeping and anger to the showers, where supposedly any violence  
10 enacted against them can be masked by the washing away of blood with water...  
11 Red paint masquerading as blood is thrown around the shower stall before the  
12 arrival of the prisoners' (122).  
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18 On the walls of Armagh the blood was real and belonged to and was within the  
19 control of the prisoners. Thus reversing the techniques of punishment, by counter-  
20 employing the tools of modern discipline and induced fear of contaminations among  
21 the prison officers.  
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25 The following female prisoner's account of mealtime in Armagh illustrates the extent  
26 to which this was true:  
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29 'I can see by her [female prisoner officer's] face that the stench in the cell must be  
30 pretty bad because even through the mask you can see her grimace... The screw  
31 has poured the tea into the cups. I lift them immediately. She won't touch the  
32 mugs even though she has gloves on; they don't like to touch anything belonging  
33 to us' (Coogan, 1980:121).  
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37 Under the circumstances, the prison officers did not want to touch anything in the  
38 cells, including the prisoners. 'They felt defiled coming in contact with the prisoners',  
39 and therefore, as a member of one of the female Dirty Protest... so that became our  
40 little weapon' (Aretxaga, 1997:136). Hence, the defiling of the cells had created a  
41 home environment, a personal space that was often free from unwanted visitors  
42 and that allowed the bodies of the female prisoners to remain relatively untouched.  
43 'The Armagh Women', reverses the roles of 'captor and 'captive' and by making it  
44 impossible for the prison system not to deal with their bodies, the prisoners  
45 asserted themselves as bodies in aggressive ways that challenged preconceived  
46 notions of femininity as a category discrete of separate from politics.  
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54 The impact of the No Wash Protest came to encompass the total social situation of  
55 the prison officers inside out outside the prison. In this proliferation of pollution, a  
56 reversal had occurred. The prison officers had sought to dominate the prisoners  
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3 through colonisation of the prisoner's bodies. The protesting prisoners redefined the  
4 silencing of their situation by transgressing the confines of the prison walls by  
5 marking the prison officer's clothes, hair and body with the stench of the protest  
6 which was inadvertently brought home to the prison officer's family.  
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10 Prison officers felt defiled coming in contact with the prisoners and the body of the  
11 women of Armagh became not only polluted but that which had the power pollute.  
12 The somatic defilement that was supposed to signify their vulnerability became the  
13 basis for empowerment. The excreta and blood went up on the cell wall and wrote  
14 the historical record of the conditions of their imprisonment. These marks on the  
15 wall was an attest to the oppression of the body in prison and 'commemorated' a  
16 particular moment of excessive abuse in the contest between the prisoners and  
17 prison officers over control of the body. By writing on the surface of the prison cell  
18 wall with faeces and menstrual blood the women reappropriated the means of  
19 containment and 'point directly at the ways in which the system that has  
20 incarcerated them is both morally and literally 'full of shit' (Lyons, 1983). Like the  
21 shaman or sacred clown who ingests polluting menstrual blood, urine, or faeces  
22 and transforms these substances into power-laden medicine, 'the women recodified  
23 their bodies, gender norms, faeces as the basis for an exclusive cultural and political  
24 identity and a renewable cultural power' (Makarius, 1970:47-50).  
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36 These conditions in turn shielded the women from the prison officials. However, in  
37 response the British Government enforced a constant change of cells and separation  
38 from the other prisoners because they potentially posed an 'unacceptable health  
39 hazard to other prisoners and staff' (Commons Written Answers 19<sup>th</sup> December  
40 1980:341-2). The women on the No Wash protest were moved every three months.  
41 This constant movement of removing the women from the faecal covered cells to  
42 damp clean cells brought a level of anxiety and fear of reprisals from prison officers.  
43 The cell movement symbolised a space in which the women not only became visible  
44 and where they become vulnerable to violence and prison disciplinary control and  
45 power. Thus reflecting the heightened vulnerability of the women and the disciplinary  
46 measures of the regime to in some way force the women to conform.  
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55 The No Wash protest lasted 13 months, during which more attention was focused on  
56 Armagh jail than at any other time during the Conflict (Armagh Coordinating Group,  
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3 1981). The political prisoners inverted the structures of control and surveillance  
4 and created a space that paralysed the gaze of the prison officers and where  
5 Menstrual blood became a weapon of political protest which created alternative  
6 spaces to resist the power of punishment.  
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10 In their attempts to encode the bodies of the prisoners, the prison officers had  
11 transmuted their own bodies into a text that displayed the signs of unavoidable  
12 polluting contact. The penal regime left traces of itself on the outside and inside of  
13 the body: the women in the same way as the Blanketmen left scatological traces  
14 of the body on the prison.  
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18 In its soiled condition the cell was no longer un-dimensional and totally transparent.  
19 The boarded up windows, the stained walls and the stench endowed on the cells  
20 and the bodies of the women with a sensory opacity, and blackness allowed some  
21 protection from the gaze of the prison officer. There was a strong analogue between  
22 the hiding of contraband by the prisoners in their vaginal and rectal cavity and the  
23 withdrawal of the women into the depths of the scatological cell which provided  
24 protection from the gaze of the prison officer and from indiscriminate beatings.  
25 However, denied the surfaces of the prisoner's body and the interior of the reach of  
26 political prisoner's cell by faecal defilement, the prison regime extended its optic to  
27 the colon-isation of the physical interior of the prisoner with invasive body cavity  
28 searches which cannot be effaced.  
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39 B 'They'd come into your cell to search your cell. There was only a bed in  
40 the cell and a few photographs and there were no toilets. We had a  
41 chamber pot. They [the prison officers] would search the cell pull the  
42 mattress off. They [the prison officers] would just totally pull the cell apart,  
43 and then you were told to strip and you wouldn't. *Well I wouldn't. Most of*  
44 *us wouldn't.*  
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47 So they then proceeded to bring in more officers to hold you down while  
48 they [the prison officers] took your clothing off and when you were  
49 completely naked you were then bent over and they would do an internal  
50 search of your anus and vagina, and all the while you're struggling and  
51 struggling and then you'd end up getting punched and stuff like that.  
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54 *It's sexual assault.* You know [the prison officers] when they [the prison  
55 officers] strip searched you they [the prison officers] are looking in your  
56 body cavities. Strip searches *were horrendous*, but very few of us ever  
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3 talk about it then you know. It got... it got horrendous, I mean the strip  
4 search.  
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6 My brother was in prison the same time as I was, for the same reasons  
7 actually and he went mad when he heard I'd been strip searched - *them*  
8 *bastards put their hands on you* and I know why he was upset. I know he  
9 was thinking right - searching his anus, right, and he knew that a woman  
10 had a vagina as well and, but he would never say those words 'vagina',  
11 being stripped, it's - our people know. It's just to go into those details of  
12 your body orifices women just don't do it. I think it's a *shaming* thing. I  
13 mean I used to say I was strip searched.  
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17 But the physical, physical side is that you're anally and vaginally  
18 searched. People just don't want to talk about it, and it is a very hard - it's  
19 a difficult thing actually. This is the first time when I've been interviewed  
20 I've said yeah someone put their fingers inside my body.  
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23 Well if you were really stroppy sometimes they'll have, they'd get the riot  
24 squad up, they would come up with the riot gear with their shields, the  
25 glass shields, and you know push you in the corner and hold you down  
26 with their shields while the women screws would search you.  
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29 Quite rapidly, we decided it was worse with having a man there present  
30 so you would just not struggle so much. Plus you were frightened. You  
31 were *frightened* of *getting torn down* there or *getting hurt down there*. All  
32 the women *resisted* to taking our clothes off. It was sort of *passive*  
33 *resistance* when it came to the searching because you were terrified of  
34 them [the prison officers] *really hurting you, you know hurting your internal*  
35 *organs*. You know that's the first time I've spoken about that.  
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39 AW Are you all right, we can stop if you would like?

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41 B Oh I'm fine, fine. Fuck no, I don't usually - I've never actually said that in  
42 an interview.  
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44 This process detailed above details the trauma of the strip search, which divorces  
45 the prisoners bodies from any known 'natural' norm or experience of the body to be  
46 found in society outside the prison. The symbiosis between prison discipline and  
47 political resistance culminated in a *literal inversion* of the body, in a dissected body  
48 turned inside out. Female bodies were somatised, re-territorialised from where  
49 bodies were not true to the self but were linked to where *Self* and *Other* come  
50 into contact and exchange affects. As the above reveals this form of sexual assault,  
51 used as a weapon of war, inflicted on her body is a stigma, an internalised shame  
52 (Agamben and Albert, 1999:106), a mark in which the community does not speak  
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3 about. McKeown et al (1994:50-1), recounts how the mirror searches used on the  
4 male Republicans at Long Kesh cannot be describe as 'no less than sexual  
5 assault... for months after, I bled every time I excreted'.  
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9 One woman recounts the body search and how for her it became the '*norms of our*  
10 *conflict*'. The next section will critically examine how the No Wash protest was  
11 gender differentiated and interpolated because of menstruation.  
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### 14 **The Gender Divide: The Politics of Menstruation**

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17 Menstruation can be taken as an example of a physical, bodily process which on  
18 one level seems to pre-exist the social, but is also something which needs to be  
19 socially managed, something which, if not managed disrupts the gendered social  
20 expectation and interaction in which bodies are socially located to the material, social  
21 relations and practices. A public show of menstrual blood could be seen as unruly,  
22 unclean, unguents, a symbol of power and danger. A leaky body intruding on to the  
23 sanitised physical body, disrupting the cultural silence surrounding menstruation  
24 (see Weiderger, 1975; Scrambler and Scrambler, 1993) and social interaction -  
25 indeed this is how women's bodies are often viewed (Grosz,1994). But is it this  
26 simple? Is menstruation social only insofar as it is managed, concealed kept from  
27 public view? Does the reflexive self come into play only after the event to manage a  
28 pre-given natural function? As the women testimonials reveal, their bodies are lived,  
29 fleshy, carrying the writings of the carceral experience. As Christine Delphy puts it,  
30 'you do not have "a" period... [but] your period' which depends on material social  
31 conditions and the cultural significance given to a physical event itself 'bereft of  
32 meaning' (Delphy, 1984:194). No bodily function can ever be outside the social. The  
33 strategies used to keep it out of routine social interaction to render invisible and the  
34 conventions circumscribing *when, how, by whom* it can be revealed. In themselves  
35 mark it as social (Jackson and Scott, 2000).  
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49 Under the circumstances of incarceration, bodily privacy becomes subordinated by  
50 the prison regime. For the women, their bodies became sites of disciplinary power  
51 and a method of survival. In this context, their bodies became a weapon, weapons  
52 which they cleverly and subversively employed.  
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3 Like their male counterparts, female Republican prisoners smeared their own  
4 excrement on the walls of their cells as a means of resistance. The women,  
5 however, had one more resource at their disposal – menstrual blood. In a society  
6 where women’s reproductive functions are governed by strict codes of secrecy,  
7 bodily hygiene, the use of menstrual blood in a public protest was, in a word,  
8 ‘shocking’ to both the prison staff and to society in general.  
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14 Decorating the cells with menstrual blood was the ultimate act of disruption and  
15 empowerment, of women taking control of their bodies to challenge the prison  
16 system regime of discipline and punishment. As Koutroulis (2001:204) remarks  
17 about menstruation:  
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21 When this fluid [menstrual blood], as bold in its emergence as it is in colour,  
22 spilt, it marked the distinctiveness of women, accentuating their difference,  
23 placing them in the category of ‘other’.  
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27 Any thought that there was difference between the men and women political  
28 prisoners, became an illusion, shattered with sight of menstrual fluid.  
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31 [The menstrual blood] objectified a difference that women had carefully obliterated  
32 in other dimensions of their political life. That is, while their political identity as  
33 members of the IRA entailed at one level a cultural desexualisation, and the dirty  
34 protest a personal defeminisation, at a deeper level the exposure of menstrual  
35 blood subverted this process by radically transforming the asexual bodies of ‘girls’  
36 into the sexualised bodies of women. In doing so, the menstrual blood became a  
37 symbol through which gender identity was reflected upon, bringing to the surface  
38 what had otherwise been erased’ (Aretxaga, 1997: 139)  
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45 Furthermore, visible menstrual blood meant a blatant disregard of menstrual  
46 ‘etiquette’ (Laws 1985: 1990) and posed a direct challenge to the ‘cultural conspiracy  
47 of silence’ surrounding menstruation (Unger and Crawford, 1996:271). From being  
48 largely concealed, private, personal and not talked about. The No Wash protest  
49 made menstruation visible, threatening the distinction between purity and impurity,  
50 placing this bodily function in the public domain drawing the attention of the male  
51 gaze to that which is not spoken about (Murphy, 1989).  
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3 When Republican women made visible their menstrual blood, the female republican  
4 body was transformed into a site of resistance, rather than 'an object of discipline  
5 and normalisation' (Davis, 1955:33).  
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9 As a consequence of the disciplinary practices applied to the social stigma of  
10 menstruating, faecal resistance, the altered presentation of femininity (Goffman,  
11 1963), the women of Armagh were seen as more disgusting and more shocking than  
12 their male comrades. Two years before in July 1978 following a visit to Long Kesh,  
13 Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich issues a statement regarding the conditions'  
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18 Having spent the whole of Sunday in the prison I was shocked at the inhumane  
19 conditions prevailing in H-Blocks 3,4, and 5 and where over 300 prisoners are  
20 incarcerated. One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let  
21 alone a human being. The nearest approach to it that I have seen was the spectacle  
22 of hundreds of homeless people living in the sewer pipes in the slums of Calcutta  
23 (Coogan 1980:158).  
24

25 The journalist Tim Coogan's account, who visited the jail at the time, wrote:  
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28 I was taken to inspect 'A' wing where the Dirty Protest is in full swing. This was  
29 sickening and appalling. Tissues, slops, consisting of tea and urine, some faeces,  
30 and clots of blood - obviously the detritus of menstruation - lay in the corridor  
31 between the two rows of cells... I found the smell of the girls cells far worse than at  
32 Long-Kesh, and several times found myself having to control feelings of nausea  
33 (1980:215-216).  
34

35 What can make the thought of 32 women on the No Wash protest more revolting  
36 than 400 dirty men? If not the exposure of menstrual blood - an element that cannot  
37 contribute much to the fetid odours of urine and faeces but can turn the stomach  
38 of outsiders. Such reactions towards abjected matter are guided by a distinction  
39 between purity and impurity  
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44 What Coogan expresses with the materiality of his body - is that it literally made him  
45 sick - is the horror and repulsion caused by the sight of 'that' which constitutes a  
46 linguistic and symbolic taboo, turns into a horror that he cannot articulate  
47 linguistically. Tim Pat Coogan states the women's cells smelled worse than men's  
48 but never explains why. One might ask if his assertion is not in fact, based on a  
49 common Western cultural assumption that equates women and their sexuality with  
50 various odours. Given the emphasis in both Irish Protestant and Catholic culture  
51 the purity of women, the No Wash protests both disrupts and plays with the  
52 dichotomies of virgin/whore, purity and cleanliness/danger and dirt. The abject  
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3 undermines distinctions between the public and the private, the interiority and  
4 exteriority of the body undermining 'our well-established distinctions, our culture and  
5 our identity (Kristeva, 1982:69). We have 'form on one side and the lack of it on the  
6 other' (1982:65). Kristeva (1982: 71), distinguished between the kinds of abjected  
7 objects in a biblical context: abdominal food, excremental matter and menstrual  
8 blood. Excremental and equivalents (decay, infection, disease, etc) are dangers to  
9 identity coming from the outside, while menstrual blood is a danger coming from  
10 within. Through his own body, Coogan also inscribes a crucial difference between  
11 men and women political prisoners. It was by joining the Dirty Protest that gender  
12 was highlighted. Ironically, it was the gender difference that Armagh women were  
13 trying to eradicate in their fight to be treated as equals: as soldiers fighting a war.  
14 But in which the act of menstruation marked them as different. Aretxaga has  
15 described the dirty protest as inscribing on the women 'primordial symbols' designed  
16 to achieve 'existential recognition' in a battle wherein 'prison discipline, with their  
17 uniformity, the substitution of names for numbers and extreme forms of humiliation,  
18 constituted the ultimate form of erasure' (Aretxaga, 1995: 133).

19  
20 From the point of view of Armagh women the No Wash protest was no different  
21 from that of the men's; it was the same struggle undertaken by equal comrades for  
22 political recognition. The emphatic reassertion of the sameness of prisoners' identity  
23 regardless of gender must be understood as an attempt to counteract the  
24 overshadowing of women prisoners under the focus of attention given to male  
25 prisoners. Such an eclipse was partly a consequence of the fact that women were  
26 not required to use prison uniforms, they were less in numbers and thus were not  
27 subjected to the dramatic conditions that the men were. This fact asserted from  
28 the start a gender difference that worked against their political visibility.

29  
30 At this level the Dirty Protest was for Armagh women an attempt to erase the gender  
31 difference introduced by the penal institutions and thus reassert their political  
32 visibility. Yet, unintentionally, the menstrual blood brought to the surface the  
33 contradictions involved in this process, shifting the meaning of the protest. It  
34 objectified a difference that women had carefully erased in other dimensions of their  
35 political life as volunteers. That is, while their political identity as members of the  
36 IRA entailed at one level a cultural desexualisation, and the No Wash protest a  
37 personal de-feminisation, at a deeper level the exposure of menstrual blood  
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3 subverted this process by radically transforming the asexual bodies of 'girls' into  
4 the sexualised bodies of women. In so doing, the menstrual blood became a symbol  
5 through which gender identity was reflected upon, bringing to the surface what had  
6 been otherwise forgotten in the struggle to be treated as equals in the quest for  
7 sameness. Women prisoners did not consider gender a significant element of  
8 differentiation either. Female members of the IRA had fought to be part of this  
9 organisation rather than part of its feminine counterpart, Cumman na mBan.  
10 Thus, they had consciously rejected gender as differential factor in political  
11 militancy.  
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19 AW Do you think when you were on no-wash there was more publicity because  
20 you were women?  
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22 S 'Yes, I think that that had an awful lot to do with it, that the men didn't have to  
23 contend with that aspect of it, and it was left unspoken. Well women how  
24 could they do that the menstrual thing every month on the protest and what  
25 are they going to do? But it's like everything else you just deal with that they  
26 way you deal with all the rest'.  
27  
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29 The difference of menstruation brought to the surface gendered norms and was used  
30 by the State as further method to punish and humiliate the women. Cockburn  
31 argues, during conflict: 'the instruments with which the body is abused in order to  
32 break the spirit tend to gender differentiated and, in the case of women, to be  
33 sexualise' (Cockburn 2001:22) . Concerns were raised by their male comrades  
34 regarding whether the women should go on the No Wash protest. The women in the  
35 study provide conflicting accounts as to whether the concern arose from  
36 benevolence or one which originated from a sexist paradigm.  
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43 The same woman explains the gender response:  
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45 'The men didn't want us going on the No Wash. It was that sexist thing.  
46 Thinking because you have periods. They don't want them to think you're  
47 not washing because we have periods. I mean it might sound like crazy if  
48 you're a feminist and all but the men did genuinely care, and they had this  
49 thing oh my God, you're going to be covered in blood and you're not going  
50 to get washed you're going to hurt yourselves. You're going to maybe do  
51 damage to your internal organs. So they were against the idea. Is that  
52 sexist?  
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55 They were saying no we don't want you to do this, we really don't. *We*  
56 *had no choice but to go on the no wash protest*.  
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3 The excreta and menstrual blood that characterised the protest exposes an excess  
4 of meaning that reveals the very character of violence as an inter-subjective relation  
5 that must necessarily be interpreted. This interpretative approach does not negate,  
6 however, Foucault's important understanding of the body as political field. Instead,  
7 it invests such political field (the body) with the inter-subjective dynamic through  
8 which power takes place. For Lacan (1977:50-52), subjectivity is always grounded  
9 in history - a history that includes the scars left by forgotten episodes and hidden  
10 discourses as much as conscious narratives.

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13 The No Wash had conscious meaning and political intentionality for the prisoners.  
14 Its significance was elaborated by them in the idiom of Republican resistance, which  
15 is part of Northern Ireland's nationalist culture. The prisoners' political beliefs arise  
16 out of a shared social experience of the working-class areas and are essential to  
17 the protest in that they provide its rationale and moral legitimation. As the  
18 ethnographies of Burton (1978) and Sluka (1989) have well shown. In other words,  
19 the prisoners knew why they were smearing their cells with excrement and under  
20 which conditions they would cease to do so. They were also aware that their  
21 political language made sense to an audience outside the jail, even when their  
22 action remained largely uncomprehended.

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25 Republican consciousness, then is crucial in understanding the experience of the  
26 No Wash protest, yet it does not exhaust it. To understand the No Wash we need  
27 to look beyond what is experienced 'subjectively' by the individuals (Lacan, 1977:55;  
28 Scott 1991). This requires a deeper probing into the kind of relation in which  
29 prisoners and guards were engaged and the larger discourses in which such relation  
30 was embedded.

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45 S 'At the height of the protest at, at complete height of it there were 40 women  
46 on protest, but not all them no-wash, because numbers fluctuated. You got  
47 women coming in maybe with a 2 year sentence, they served 2 years and  
48 got out, and you got other women who were doing life, but at the height of  
49 no-wash protest there were 32 women were on protest'.  
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53 The claim to political status, solidarity and sense of belonging was so important to  
54 the women precisely because it implied a deep existential recognition, the  
55 acknowledgement that one's being-in-the-world mattered. Although the prison  
56 officers reduced forms of communication in the attempt to break collective identity,  
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3 the women found ways to resist and open up channels of communication by digging  
4 a hole through one of the walls, leaving political writings on the walls that give a  
5 history of the previous occupier's thoughts. Living in these abnormal extreme  
6 conditions, of permanent semi-darkness and limited communication with the other  
7 women they carved out spaces that re-wrote the individualisation of prison  
8 punishment by creating methods that reconnected them with others and the outside  
9 world.  
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15 The role of camaraderie reinforced the sense of collective identity and strengthened  
16 the political consciousness of the women. Even in extreme conditions all the women  
17 spoke of the spirit of solidarity and camaraderie.  
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21 'Our morale was brilliant. I just think the more the more they tried to *break us*  
22 the likes of the British government, the British army or the screws [prison  
23 officers] in the prisons. We were revolutionaries and we came back stronger  
24 every time. I don't know why that is.  
25

26  
27 As Farrell writes about a typical evening on the No Wash protest:

28 'The evening passes swiftly. The singing has started. Different one's call for a  
29 song. The supper arrives – a pancake each- big deal! We're locked up for the  
30 night. We listen to the male prisoners cleaning the wing. Soon they'll be off  
31 and all will be quiet. The our entertainment begins. Every night at 9.00pm we  
32 have rosary in Irish. One girl shouts it out the door and the rest respond. Our  
33 voices are good and strong with persistent shouting. Then, perhaps, bingo  
34 from home-made cards. It's good crack at Annemarie next door persists in  
35 cheating but is always found out. Then, at 11:00 pm, the ghost stories  
36 continue from the night before as most lie in their beds under the covers to  
37 keep warm as they listen to the story. At midnight all noise ceases, an order  
38 laid down by our own staff. I get into my bed under the blanket – no  
39 pillowcases or sheets: those too were taken by the screws'(cited in Brady et  
40 al (2012: 216).  
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44 As Corcoron (2006:126) explains, the gaol (jail) became a 'tacht' (place) where  
45 Republicans provided self-instructed courses in turn provided a means to reclaim  
46 the language of the oppressed (Friere, 1972) .  
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50 Another woman states:

51  
52 'There was the windows were boarded up and the spy-hole on the door was  
53 boarded up as well from the outside, but the comradeship was absolutely  
54 second to none. That is like something I've never ever come across since'.  
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57 This sense of oneness was created by the enforced isolation with one another  
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3 SW 'We were locked up 23 hours a day with the same person. You'd get out for  
4 an hour's exercise, and you were in the cell which was covered with your  
5 own excrement because there was nothing else to do with it'.  
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8 What this paper clearly demonstrates is that in this environment in which the prison  
9 regime serves to further dehumanise the political prisoners, they were able to disturb  
10 the silence surrounding their bodies and use their menstruating status as weapon in  
11 the armoury against the prisons power to punish. Research has exposed the  
12 distinctly gendered characteristics of penal regimes within this context of violence,  
13 conflict and sectarianism, and resistance to regimes also took gendered forms (see  
14 Scraton and Moore 2005; Corcoran 2006).  
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21 What this article demonstrates through the voices of the women is a level of  
22 visibility on the violation of private bodily space. The bodies of political prisoners are  
23 interpollated as agentic weapons against the State yet conterminously their bodies  
24 become bearers of pain and suffering. The women demonstrate how they  
25 reconfigured ideas of femininity, breaking the silence around menses and reclaimed  
26 prison space through the idea of the threat of dirt, contamination and pollution.  
27 These acts caused the prison officers to create barriers between themselves and the  
28 prisoners who were on political protest. Although the body is a carrier of meanings  
29 this type of lived 'experience' also makes the body a carrier of pain (Scarry,  
30 1988:12-15). The testimonies of the women shows how the bodies become potent  
31 weapons of war demonstrating women's resistance to the carceral lens, and the  
32 important role they played in the Republican movement  
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For Peer Review

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