

Gendering Resistance within an Irish Republican Prisoner Community: A Conversation with Laurence McKeown

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Preface:

This conversation centers primarily on a paper Laurence McKewon presented at the International Studies Association conference in Washington DC in February 1999. The paper titled “Gender and the Social Construction of an Irish Republican Prisoner Community,” and Laurence’s presentation generated much discussion during the session and since then. Rather than publish the paper as is, we thought that it would more appropriate to use it as a springboard for a critical conversation of such issues as gendered constructions of identity and conflict, practices of resistance, political violence, and representation. The conversation is reconstructed from bits and pieces of insightful exchanges in Belfast, Washington DC and in cyberspace woven together with extensive excerpts from Laurence’s original paper. In many ways, it feels artificial to piece together what is supposed to be a naturally flowing, semi-coherent conversation between two people, as this conversation does not take place in “real” time and space. At the same time, when we truly engage someone’s work, we continue to converse with him or her in our minds, imagining what would they say if there were here and now. In terms of process, I wrote the first draft of what follows. It was full of question marks, which Laurence answered and blank spaces, which he filled in. The finished product is therefore very much a collaborative piece of work and may serve as a good example of a more imaginative method of knowledge production.

SS: The paper you presented at ISA is part of a larger project: your doctoral thesis. Perhaps it would be good to begin this conversation by situating it in relation to your thesis in general and feminist influences on your work in particular.

LM: Indeed, the ISA paper draws on research I conducted for my doctoral thesis, which I completed in September 1998.¹ While I was first exposed to feminist theories in prison -- something we will probably touch on later in this conversation -- writings in feminist methodology played a critical role in influencing my approach to the research: principles such as the role of the researcher in the research; the relationship of the researcher to the researched; subjectivity versus objectivity; experience versus method; the ethics of research and how to challenge accusations about non-validity. Feminist insights and practical suggestions for how to approach research from a more humanistic and egalitarian manner also greatly appealed to me and removed many of the doubts and fears I had when setting out on my research. Feminist readings also introduced me to the idea of reflexivity, of constantly assessing and re-assessing the approach to the research, of detailing factors outside of the research itself, which had an impact upon it. Another useful insight involved the importance on reflecting upon changes in the research process at all stages from the first phrasing of the ‘research question’ through to analysis of the findings. Generally speaking, I think that feminist writings put me much more at ease and provided much encouragement by presenting me with a different view of what a piece of academic research could consist of; I realized that it did not have to be cold, objective, or clinical, to the point of being boring.

SS: You probably came across feminist critiques, which rejected conventional research paradigms as reflecting masculine ways of thinking. It is interesting that while your research focuses almost solely on the experiences of men in prison, which is often viewed as a hyper-masculine space, you found feminist methodologies appealing

LM: Actually I don’t see this as a contradiction at all. The motivation behind my research shared much in common with many feminist researchers: I was trying to highlight marginalised voices and perspectives. I

didn't want to distance myself from the subjects of the research or to appear to be neutral or clinically objective about the topic of my research: such an approach seemed neither possible nor desirable. On the contrary, I wanted to be as much a part of the research as I could and to relate my own personal experience of imprisonment to the research. I wanted to write myself and my own experiences into the research and to do so in a collective manner with the other participants in the research who I refer to throughout as the 'narrators'. In other words, because of the nature of my research and my own involvement with it, I couldn't relate to the stern, objective, competitive, authoritarian, cold texts, often informed by masculinist approaches to knowledge and power. Instead, I was drawn to a more open, flexible, reflexive, subjective, and supportive approach inspired by feminist writings. I viewed feminist insights and methodologies as an appropriate way, to re-visit and reflect upon the changes brought about in men's lives through their experiences in the Irish republican prisoner community and how their involvement in struggle led to the emergence of different conceptions of masculinity. At the same time I feared that my rather unconventional approach to research might pose problems for me within the field of academia.

SS: In order to create space for the exploration of complex dynamics within the Irish republican prisoner community, including changes in dominant conceptions of masculinity, you had to call into question dominant representations of IRA volunteers in general and Irish Republican prisoners in particular. You begin your ISA paper by contrasting the community of Irish republican prisoners' you were part of with the existing body of literature on prisons and prisoners. It seems that highlighting these differences is crucial to understanding many of the processes you discuss in your paper, especially the changes in and challenges to dominant conceptions of masculinity.

LM: The image most people have of prisons is one that has been shaped by what they see in films or on their TV screens. It's a very brutal image that's painted. It's also an image that is probably a fairly accurate portrayal of life in high or maximum-security prisons in the USA. The prison I'm referring to, Long Kesh (or Maze Prison as the British authorities refer to it) in the north of Ireland is also a maximum-security prison but one that holds political prisoners, both loyalist and republican. The conditions that exist there are much different from other prisons in Ireland, Britain and America. The culture and social organisation of the republican prisoner community in Long Kesh is more likened to the social organisation of other political prisoner communities such as that of the ANC prisoners held on Robben Island. In addition, the manner in which Irish republicanism in general has been constructed in the media, in films and through fiction has led to a distortion of just what type of person is involved in the conflict and why. As a result, journalists and scholars alike have been unable to make any sense out of the situation here. Most social constructions of Irish republicans have been characterised by hostility. Republicans are generally portrayed as an inhumane and quasi-racialised group of terrorists; similarly in the case of republican prisoners. Our 'official' categorisation has often been as 'criminals' and 'terrorists', our manner considered intransigent and troublesome, our behaviour deemed unruly and subversive.

SS: One of the most powerful ways you choose to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of Irish republicanism is by telling your own story of imprisonment and resistance and those of fellow political prisoners in Long Kesh. The interplay between the personal and the political – a common feminist theme -- seems to be a central theme in your work.

LM: For those of us who came into our own in the context of a political struggle, the personal and the political have been always inseparable. I myself was an Irish republican prisoner, having spent 16 years in Long Kesh. Those years, and what I experienced during them, have largely shaped the type of person I now am. Often the prison experience was a brutal one but my memories of it also contain moments of the most intense feelings of love and comradeship, of exhilaration, of creativity, of achievement. It is often said that prison is what you make it. That can be said to be particularly so in the case of imprisoned Irish republicans who have created a vibrant, energetic, supportive, progressive community in Long Kesh – one could say, a luxuriant oasis in the midst of a harrowing desert.

SS: You were arrested and imprisoned in August 1976. That was a significant year, one which triggered an unprecedented wave of resistance within the prisons, which over time transformed both your lives as political prisoners and the republican movement more generally.

LM: Yes. Until March 1976 political prisoners in the north of Ireland were recognised by the government as such. They didn't wear prison uniform or do prison work. They were housed in separate accommodation from other prisoners. They conducted their own education courses and liaised with the prison authorities through their own appointed leadership. All of that ended on 1 March 1976 when the British government introduced what became known as its 'criminalisation' policy. This policy aimed to treat political prisoners as mere criminals. The policy formed part of a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy devised by political, military and intelligence chiefs designed to combat and defeat republican insurrection in general and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in particular.

We, of course, were unaware at that time of the extent of the struggle facing us if we were to successfully counter attempts to 'label' us as 'criminals'. I was 19 years of age at the time. That was the average age of prisoners then. Many others were much younger than I was. One was only 16. We were very naïve; we didn't know what lay in store for us. In fact most of us were not even aware that such a strategy was underway. Our understanding of politics at that time was very limited. We were also fairly powerless in terms of what we could do to reverse the policy. All we could do was refuse to give our consent to such a policy. So that's what we did. We refused to abide by the prison regime; refused to wear the prison clothes or do prison work. That resulted in us being locked up in cells 24 hours a day, deprived of all forms of stimuli. We had no books, TV, radio, newspapers, no exercise. We ate in our cells, we slept in our cells, and we paced the floor in our cells. We carried out all our basic bodily functions in our cells. In March 1978 our protest intensified to one of no wash which involved smearing our cell walls in our own excreta. What was begun in September 1976 turned out to be the longest and most intensive period of prison protest ever waged by republican prisoners to win the recognition as political prisoners. It was a protest that ended in the death of ten prisoners on hunger strike in 1981. It was a struggle that had significant ramifications outside of the prison and it was a prison struggle that radicalised the republican prisoners in a manner never envisaged by the government. Once we understood the importance of the construct of 'criminal' in the government's strategy to defeat the IRA, we devised a strategy to oppose it and set about propagating our own message of what and who the 'republican prisoner' really was. Given our conditions of incarceration we appeared, at least at first sight, relatively powerless and thus unable to influence government policy. Yet, the combination of our strong political conviction, the support of our communities on the outside, our unity of purpose and discipline, we had a power not manifested in normal prisoner communities. That power enabled us to act in such a manner as to frustrate the intentions of the government and prison authorities.

SS: Much has been written about the blanket and no-wash protests and the hunger strikes but your account is unique in that you explicitly deal with the changes in dominant constructions and understanding of masculinity throughout this period. More specifically, you choose to highlight the power of those deemed by many powerless by critically examining the body as both a tool and site of resistance. The body, especially the female body, has been central to feminist theorizing and most recently has become an integral part of gay and lesbians studies. Little or no attention has been paid, however, to the deployment of male bodies in the context of resistance struggles in general and the republican struggle in the North of Ireland in particular.

LM: I think that starting with a personal account may make it easier to understand how we turned our bodies from objects of abuse by the prison authorities to a powerful weapon, a hiding place and a symbol of resistance. My introduction to the protest once I was sentenced (to life imprisonment) in April 1977 was an experience that will remain with me always. I was taken into the circle of H Block 2, a Block that had until recently held the young prisoners – those under 21 years of age. The circle was brightly illuminated. Light reflected off the keenly polished floor. I was ordered by a prison warder to cross the circle and face the wall. I was then told to strip. This I did, down to my underwear, then stared at the wall directly in front of me. I could hear movement behind me, the everyday business of a prison. Food trolleys clanging through grilles. The warder returned and shouted, "I said strip....everything off".

Slowly I removed my underwear and dropped them to the ground. They lay beside my small pile of discarded clothing. By now a crowd of warders had gathered behind me. I could hear their boots squeak on the shiny surface. There were laughs. I wanted to laugh with them. I didn't want to be the object of their abuse. I waited on the blows to come. I knew a 'reception committee' was laid on for all new arrivals and

what it consisted of. I was told to turn around. I looked at them and looked nowhere at the same time. I waited. The blows never come. Maybe it was payday. Maybe they were too tired. Who knows. Anyway, I was sent down C Wing, to a cell almost at the very bottom of the wing. It was on the right hand side, empty cells on either side of it. No one to contact me, to knock my wall, to whisper through the pipes to me, to pass me cigarettes. The walk to the cell took forever although it was a relatively short distance. I'm 6ft 2", not the type of person to walk down a narrow low-ceilinged corridor without being noticed. All the more noticeable, however, whenever I'm walking stark naked. It was a strange sensation. Unreal. The thought I recall most clearly was the dilemma about what to do with my hands. I had no pockets to put them in. They felt clumsy. Should I put them over my privates in an ashamed, embarrassed posture (which I didn't feel)? Or swing them by my sides in a 'devil-may-care' attitude (which I certainly didn't feel)? I compromised by letting them hang loosely by my sides. They felt like dead weights.

SS: From your vivid description, it seems quite clear that you were totally unprepared for this experience. This is not surprising as we live in a society where most men's bodies are not being objectified. Moreover, I don't suppose that your training as an IRA volunteer prepared you for this particular experience. How did you cope?

LM: It was not easy, especially in the first few days. It's difficult to remain dignified in such circumstances but I realised that that was the object of the exercise. I think in a sense I then tried to shut myself off from my body. I walked erect but casually and looked everyone in the eye. Some of the prisoners glanced my way and silently empathised with me. Others looked elsewhere. The warders who laughed loudest and most falsely gradually became muted when I held their gaze. Their homophobic fears stirred possibly, "Do I get a kick out of staring at naked male bodies?" The days that followed were without doubt the loneliest days of my life. In a period of just 48 hours I had been sentenced to life imprisonment then stripped naked and placed in solitary confinement. I felt totally isolated - from my family on the outside and my comrades in the inside. I knew no one. Life was going on around me. Those who had conformed to the prison regime carried out their chores in their blue striped shirts and black denim trousers. My naked flesh set me apart as a non-conformer - isolated under total lock-up. Ten days later I was moved to H Block 5 to join my other comrades who were on the blanket protest.

SS: How important was the blanket protest to the construction of the Irish republican prisoners community you were part of and to gradual transformation of conventional conceptions of masculinity?

LM: The blanket protest was no doubt a significant turning point both in the crystallisation of our sense of collective identity and community and in the changes in rigid conceptions of masculinity. Throughout the prison protest we became very conscious of our bodies. Naked bodies. Bodies that were brutalised. Bodies that were a haven. Bodies that signaled resistance and became ultimately a weapon to the death. Stripped of our clothing and all the other social props that go with conventional life on the outside we had to dig deep within ourselves to discover what we as people were really made of. The type of living and social conditions we experienced also made us look afresh at our identity as a group and examine our politics. Unable to meet and socialise in the conventional manner forced us to develop new means of communication. We had to speak out the side of doors or windows to one another. Our voices were disembodied. Out of that new means of communication new values governing social relations arose. We began to look at one another in a new light. We saw beyond the physical manifestation of the person and looked instead at their character and the values they held.

SS: In this context, you also became increasingly aware of different constructions of and behaviour associated with masculinity around you

LM: Yes, in particular, we became conscious of the roles the prison warders adopted. Watching their behaviour over time became an important lesson for us in how masculinity can be expressed in various forms. Prison warders newly recruited to the service or coming to work in the protest Blocks for the first time always appeared wary in the initial stages. They were friendlier, or at least not as hostile. After only a matter of days, however, their manner and behaviour changed – often dramatically. They added a 'swagger' to their step, some began to wear shades even in the darkened environment of the Blocks, shirt sleeves were rolled up, steel clips were attached to the heels of their boots as if to give them a greater sense

of their physical presence. Observing such a transformation in overt physical dress and behaviour provided us with a valuable insight into how particular expressions of masculinity are synonymous with situations of power over others though we wouldn't have understood it in those terms at the time.

SS: In addition to the routine homophobic comments and systematic attempts to embarrass you because of your nakedness, there were also more crude attempts to interfere with the protest, especially as more men joined and it gained support on the outside. . .

LM: Yes, throughout the period 1976 to 1981 various attempts were made to drive us off the protest and one of the methods used was simply to brutalise us. This involved beatings on a regular basis. One other form was forced washings. Prisoners were dragged out naked and forcibly shaved; heads and beard. Then thrown into baths of scalding water, scrubbed down with hard bristled deck scrubbers, doused in disinfectant then dragged back into the cells. This was a policy initiated at the highest levels. At other times the brutality was on a more casual basis, carried out by the prison warders on the ground. It was through experiences such as these that we as prisoners gained an insight into how people can be physically abused. People who are held captive. People whose lives are dominated by more powerful people or who find themselves in situations where they are powerless. Naked and powerless.

SS: In the context of this discussion in the paper, you do quote Iris Marion Young's reference to physical violence as one of the five 'faces of oppression,' a common reference in the literature on violence against women.² Was this a conscious attempt on your part to highlight this connection?

LM: Of course there is quite an obvious connection there. Iris Young writes about "members of some groups [who] live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate or destroy the person."³ We were vulnerable and I think out of that experience we could relate to others, especially women and children who often find themselves on the receiving end of the power of men.

SS: Another place in the paper where this connection is made explicit is when you discuss the internal body searches, which were likened by many to rape.

LM: This analogy is related to the fact that during the period we discuss our bodies became hiding places. We weren't allowed such things as tobacco, pens, or paper to write on so we had to smuggle these items into the prison on our monthly visit. The only totally secure place to then hide these items was inside our own bodies. We wrapped the 'contraband' in cling film and inserted it into our anus. Because the warders became aware that we were doing this they often conducted internal body searches which involved inserting prongs into the anus of the person to probe for hidden contraband. Ciaran McGillicuddy, writing many years later, provides a very graphic description of one such search which he likened to rape.⁴ But despite the terrible abuse, we the naked body became a symbol, a symbol which signaled opposition to the attempts to criminalise us. The blanket men as we became known, because of the blanket we wore around us like a skirt to clothe ourselves, became a symbol of resistance and people protesting on our behalf on the outside often adopted such a garb.

SS: It seems to me that the confrontation between the blanketmen and the prison guards can be read as a clash between two masculinities shaped by different modalities of identity, community, and power in a context of a broader political struggle. Your naked bodies in many ways became the battlefields. The reactions of the guards reflected a combination of personal embarrassment, political contempt, and homophobia. In many ways, despite your vulnerability, the guards felt threatened, thus seeking desperately to demonstrate that they were still in control by trying to ridicule and embrace you. As your personal story and many other testimonies of republican prisoners who were on the blanket underscore, the ability to overcome one's own embarrassment and ignore the guards' comments was a sign of strength, an integral part of the struggle. Unlike more conventional forms of militarised masculinity and heroism grounded in the strength of the body, the masculinities of Republican prisoners, which were constructed during this struggle centered on a vulnerable body guided by will power, determination and solidarity. In an article you wrote you explain how the strong sense of equality, collective identity, and unity of purpose turned weakness into strength:

“The blanket protest brought about an 'equality amongst us' even if it was an equality of brutal existence...everyone was an individual in his own right, with all his peculiar characteristics, abilities and talents, and no one was given any special social status...What mattered was how individually and as a unit we were to get through another day. The common bond of struggle over and above everything else was to provoke thought in anyone willing to open his mind to it and, for those who did, resulted in a critical look at oneself and a reassessment of previously held beliefs.”⁵

SS: The hunger strikes were another major turning point for republican prisoners and the movement more generally and for you in particular. . .

LM: While the hunger strikes are often portrayed, rightly so, as major turning points in the republican struggle, they should also be viewed as a natural progression of our prison protest. The blanket and no-wash protests eventually culminated in two hunger strikes. One in 1980 and another shortly afterwards in 1981. During the latter ten prisoners died. The hunger strikes were the most extreme example of how the body became a weapon for us. In fact that's how Francie Hughes, the second of the hunger strikers to die in 1981 summed it up. Francie had been captured following a shoot-out with soldiers of the Special Air Services Regiment, a crack counter-insurgency unit of the British Army. One soldier was killed during the incident and Francie was seriously injured and captured several hours later some distance from the scene. In one of the better know books written on the hunger strikes, David Beresford recalls how, on the night before Francie began his hunger strike, he spoke of how he was going to use his body in his fight against the regime.

“... he had agonised, just after being wounded, over whether to hold on to his M14 for a final shot-out, or abandon it and try to get away. Sometimes he had regretted the decision he had taken, but now he was being given a weapon again and this time he was going to use it to the end.”⁶

The hunger strike itself has been understood in a variety of ways. O'Malley has referred to it as the acting out of a centuries old mythical republican ideal of martyrdom.⁷ Feldman, on the other hand, views the hunger strike as a tactic by the prisoners to mobilise political activity on their behalf on the outside.⁸ Aretxaga has argued that it can be regarded in both ways.⁹ Beresford and Campbell et al., however, by allowing the prisoners to speak in their own words show that the prisoners resorted to such an extreme form of protest only when they felt that all other options open to them to resolve the situation had been tried and failed.¹⁰ The comments of Margaret Thatcher to Cardinal Thomas O'Fiaich, (Catholic Primate of all-Ireland who made various attempts to resolve the prison situation) interestingly reflect the extent of her political knowledge into the situation and how she interpreted the prison protest in terms of gender roles: “Will someone please tell me why they are on hunger strike: asked the Prime Minister. I have asked so many people. Is it to prove their virility?”¹¹

On a more personal level, the hunger strike period is of particular significance to me as I was on the hunger strike – for seventy days. In fact to all intents and purposes I died on it as I lapsed into a coma on the 69th day though the following day my mother authorised medical intervention to revive me. Otherwise I would have been the eleventh prisoner to die on the strike. Pressure had mounted on families to intervene when a relative was no longer conscious and this occurred on a number of occasions. Shortly after it happened to me, the hunger strike was called off.

SS: How conscious were you during the prison protest of gender relations and roles?

LM: Although our experiences during the prison protest made us become more conscious of gender roles it was a disjointed type of consciousness. We learnt to appreciate and even pay tribute to women's participation in and contribution to the struggle. It took us much longer, however, to begin to critically examine our own roles and privileges as men, let alone the gendered division of power and labor in society as well as in the republican movement. Our respect of women's political involvement grew out of the contacts we had with our imprisoned female comrades in Armagh prison. They suffered particularly harsh conditions within the prison because of their actions. In terms of the prison regime they were deemed

doubly guilty – not only had they broken the laws of the state but they had also gone against their feminine gender roles as defined by society. The other example of women’s mobilisation came from the involvement of female relatives on the outside in the campaigns in support of our demands. The first women to campaign on our behalf in 1976 were the mothers, wives and sisters of those imprisoned. The women clad themselves in blankets and sat in improvised tents in their own housing estates to bring attention to the issue. Their actions were successful and support and street demonstrations grew and grew. They traveled the world, gave interviews, spoke to anyone and everyone. Throughout the period 1976-1981 they were the ones to the fore in organising street protests, lobbying politicians, church, trade unions and many others. And they came under attack for that. Maura Drumm was shot dead as she lay in a hospital bed. Miriam Daly was shot dead in her own home. Bernadette McAliskey was shot and seriously injured but survived. It was also the women who visited the jail and who smuggled items to us. They were the main couriers and they suffered as a result of that at the hands of the prison warders. They often endured strip searches and verbal and physical abuse. Several were arrested and taken to interrogation centres for questioning. Some were charged in the courts.

SS: Still, this appreciation of women’s contribution to the struggle seems to be confined to traditional conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations. Women’s political participation in the struggle is always a footnote in the stories that glorify men’s resistance and when women are mentioned, more often than not they are cast in supportive roles: as mothers, sisters or wives. Seems like the awareness you described was fraught with contradictions. . .

LM: Change is not easy, especially in the context of a struggle and some of the contradictions you highlight have indeed become apparent at certain stages. One such example occurred at the time of the hunger strike when the female prisoners volunteered to embark upon the hunger strike. Their decision prompted a major debate amongst the male prisoners. A commonly heard remark at the time was that “we couldn’t allow the (wee) girls to go on hunger strike”. At the same time those making such comments were well aware that should they have made them within earshot of any of those “wee girls” the very least they would have been a stern rebuke. Mairead Farrell who was the leader of the prisoners at the time and who was herself executed in Gibraltar several years later by the Special Air Service unit of the British Army was the OC (Officer Commanding) of the female prisoners at that time and was not someone to take lightly the patronising or sexist views of male comrades.

SS: So what was your reaction to this challenge?

LM: The idea of women prisoners playing an equal role shocked many though I don’t think we looked upon it at the time as anything to do with equal roles. They were regarded as the weaker sex. They had to be protected from their own recklessness. It was not expressed in such terms of course. The debate was more centered on what would be thought of us men if it were seen that women had to go to the fore in such an extreme form of protest as a hunger strike. Some did however express the opinion that women being on the hunger strike would be beneficial as this would horrify the public, outrage them so much, or garner sympathy that people would respond to our demands for support. Either way the debate around whether the women should be on the hunger strike or not was not looked at from the perspective of gender roles and identity. At the end of the day the decision was made by the Movement on the outside that the women would not join the hunger strike until 30 days after the men had begun it. Discussion on the issue, however, had raised questions about just what role women should or could play within the struggle, what relations men had with those women in the struggle and what relations men had with their female relatives be they mothers, sisters, wives, partners.

SS: The aftermath of the hunger strikes created new spaces for re-thinking social and political practices among republican prisoners and in the broader community.

LM: Besides acquiring a deeper understanding of our politics, the experiences of the blanket protest and hunger strikes forged a level of solidarity and commitment amongst the community of republican prisoners never before witnessed and more critically, a sense of still being ‘active’ in the wider republican struggle on the outside. The ‘prisoner-of-war’ began to see himself not as a ‘casualty of war’ but as a ‘political activist’, as an ‘agent of change’. Our struggles against attempts to ‘criminalise’ us radicalised and

deepened our political beliefs. Apart from the experiences gained through the blanket protest and hunger strikes, our ideas at the time were also influenced by Paulo Freire's writings on critical pedagogy and education for liberation. His theories complemented the sort of plan we had in our own heads. The idea of involving all; of mass struggle.¹² There followed a very intensive period during 1984-1985, a period of intense critical reflection upon who we were and where we were at at that particular time and where we were going to. Whereas in the early 1970s the structures that organised our every-day activities in prison had been very hierarchical and based on conventional army forms of discipline, we began to move away from these structures and explore new collective and egalitarian forms of social organisation. A whole new set of structures, which more properly reflected our politics and values, was put in place. New roles were devised where people took on responsibility and accountability. There was no such thing as the strong and the weak. People had their own individual strengths and weaknesses in particular fields.

SS: In this context, you describe in the paper a more radical transformation in gender consciousness, at least among some of the prisoners. What I find particularly interesting is that the discussion of gender relations and roles didn't take place in the vacuum. They seem to be directly connected to the broader social and political transformations and a re-examination of power relations within the republican prisoner community and the republican movement more generally.

LM: Yes, the re-examination of gender roles was part and parcel of the broader discussions and transformations that characterised that period. The new structures we created required that everyone shared the daily chores. Roles which on the outside would have been defined as women's roles, washing, cleaning, ironing, cooking, tidying up were roles that men in prison have to do. That had always been the case in prison but it had always been seen as a chore, now people were encouraged to look upon it as taking control of their own lives and environment. It shouldn't be that people should only respond to orders to carry out these deeds. You should be self-motivated to do so. You should be contributing to your own community. You shouldn't be asking someone else to be doing something you weren't prepared to do yourself. So the roles that men may have previously felt uncomfortable with were increasingly adopted with a sense of pride in the expertise brought to it. The chores weren't done in slipshod fashion. Men took respect in their work and care in it. Humorous incidents would arise where someone newly sentenced would arrive into the prison and having eaten their dinner would walk to the sink and simply drop their plate into it and walk away. Then someone would call them back and ask, "When's your mother coming in then?" "Is the maid out there?" The newly-sentenced would be baffled as to what this meant until told that he would from then on have to carry out such chores himself as no one was coming behind him to clean up his mess. No one would be doing for him the things that would have been done for him on the outside, usually by his mother, wife or sister. In this way again men became more conscious of just what exactly their behaviour had been like on the outside and the expectations and assumptions they would have made. Masculinity and the role of the imprisoned were simultaneously redefined in practice.

SS: In addition to embracing daily tasks viewed on the outside as "women's work," the new structures also propelled some of you to consciously begin to take on other roles that were often deemed feminine. . .

LM: Well, part of the struggle within prison was coping with the psychological impact of incarceration. There were no adequate psychiatric, psychological or counseling facilities available to prisoners, or prisoners were reluctant to avail of what was on offer because of what they perceived as a political bias amongst the practitioners of such professions. So, it came down to us as a community to assist as best as we could. This meant learning new skills and reading up on techniques that we were previously unaware of but it also meant opening up an area of our own lives, and taking on roles that we would not have envisaged at one time. It meant taking on roles that we ourselves would once have regarded as feminine roles. Within a supportive culture of self-help and mutual-reinforcement such roles as counseling and providing help, support, solace, comfort and encouragement were roles that we as prisoners had to take upon ourselves. The culture of the republican prisoner community became one in which people could be nurtured, based on the belief that the group would only be as strong as the weakest individual within it. The group depended upon each individual within it for its continued existence. It depended on the individuals being strong enough to resist the prison regime in its attempts to break the will of the republican prisoners. And what we as prisoners tried to develop was a way in which we could be strong and resilient without at the same time losing our sensitivity. We became aware of the weaknesses of one another and tried to incorporate those

needs and weaknesses into our struggle. Indeed we overcame our weaknesses and nourished our strengths through the various struggles that we waged. Throughout this process, masculinity was once again redefined.

SS: The transformation you describe in structures and roles is quite drastic. How smooth was the process? Was there any resistance to these changes in general and the re-definition of manhood and gender roles in particular?

LM: Not everyone accepted that new communal existence. There were those who resented it. They were people whose broader political views had not developed to allow them to change on a more personal level whereas those who developed a more critical consciousness, a more reflective outlook were open to the new practice. It was not a utopia, however; it was struggle.

SS: This struggle took a new dimension with the introduction of the women's studies classes. As you are probably aware, to an outsider, the idea of a massive number of Irish republican prisoners studying feminist texts and critically reflecting on their privileges as men is quite intriguing. Yet, in your analysis, the women's studies classes seem like a natural progression of the transformative processes that were already underway in the prison during that period.

LM: I am aware that the notion of republican prisoners engaged in anti-sexist discussions doesn't fit the stereotypes of hyper-masculine and inherently sexist IRA men. Perhaps this is why this story has remained largely untold until recently. The women's studies class grew out of the broader programme of conscientisation and a comprehensive system of informal education that was put into place during that time. This involved everything from basic literacy classes to studies in economics. The women's studies class arose out of an academic course that was being taught in the jail by Joanna McMinn as part of the Open University's *Changing Experience of Women* course. Another comrade and myself were studying the course, which raised some eyebrows at the time. I remember an elderly aunt visiting me in the prison who thought from the title that it had something to do with the menopause! But out of discussions with Joanna the idea for a more informal women's studies class arose. The proposal tied in with what we were attempting to achieve with our overall educational process so we organised it in conjunction between our own structures and the prison education department. In all, a total of over 200 men took part in the women's studies class over a two-year period.

SS: Can you describe the rationale behind the women's studies class and the way it was implemented.

LM: Part of our educational process and the raising of consciousness had been a focus on feminist literature and novels but until then such a study had remained fairly theoretical. What the women's studies course allowed us to do was to apply some of those theories to our own lives. In fact the course quickly developed into a study of masculinity and anti-sexist behaviour informed by Joanna's input from a feminist perspective. Even the term masculinity was one we initially found difficulty in coming to terms with. We couldn't see what exactly was meant by the term in the context of power and relationships. I recall Joanna once saying that even the way we sat in our chairs spoke masculinity. When I questioned her as to what she meant she said, "Well look at how you are all slumped in those chairs with your legs wide open, could you imagine women sitting around like that?" She was right. I had never thought of it in those terms. That led on to other things, then men opened up and told stories about their experiences of growing up and the expectations that were placed on them in terms of their masculinity and having to live up to these expectations and stereotypes of masculinity. These stories prompted laughter, which was the other good thing about the class, the humorous parts of it.

SS: You describe a process that began with men interested in the course because they wanted to learn more about women and feminist literature and over time evolved into a forum where men had to confront their own power and privileges vis-à-vis women

LM: I think what came out of the course in general was that men became aware of the power they held. Power they held over their female relatives and loved ones even though they were imprisoned, or the power they held over women in general by virtue of the fact that they were men. Even though we had been

through various forms of struggle and had become conscious of other situations of power, even though we understood the vulnerability we had experienced and the repression we had encountered, we still couldn't understand the power we had over women in certain situations simply by virtue of the fact that we were men. That revelation led us to challenge relationships we had, made us look at issues of emotional control, the fact that we could be imposing power in situations even when we weren't necessarily looking to exert an influence.

SS: This process must have been quite unsettling to some prisoners

LM: Yes, there were also other prisoners who never took part in the class for whatever reason. I think that some saw it as a step too far. People who already had problems with the de-structuring that had occurred in the system of command, the move from a hierarchical to a more communal form, the development of a more open and democratic form of leadership, these people saw the women's studies class as a step too far. As one prisoner said to me, "You have castrated the men".

SS: Years later, for another academic course you took with the Open University, you conducted an analysis of the effects the women's studies class had on you and the other men who participated in the class.

LM: That's right but before I address the specifics of that study, let me point out that the study itself is a good example of how we combined our lives as political activists, integrating reflection on our practice, with the academic studies we were pursuing. The results of my study showed that the course had been a tremendous success and that it raised more questions than answers – which is what most men attended for. It put a focus onto masculinity and the role that played in our lives in an all-male society and in our relations with women. The success of the course was, I believe, due to two factors: a willingness on the part of the men to look critically at gender roles and their own behaviour; and Joanna's own background as an educator with working class women's groups using a community development/group work approach similar to the one the men were working to in their own educational programme. It certainly wasn't the case that everyone who went through the course came out as 'new men' at the end of it but it challenged our thoughts and practice on a wide number of issues. It raised consciousness on gender roles and the perspective of a woman. We weren't in situations where we had the responsibility to run a household, provide for a family, look after sick children or parents so couldn't say just how we would behave in such situations. But nevertheless I believe it had a major impact upon us and in particular it moved us from a theoretical debate about feminism to a practical one about masculinity.

SS: One of the contentious issues raised in the context of the course was that of pornography. . .

LM: Contrary to the image people have of prisons, there wasn't a high degree of pornographic material in the jail. The fact that we were political prisoners, had a higher level of political consciousness and had female comrades in another jail, had an obvious bearing on the situation. What pornographic material did exist was kept very much underground. There was a stigma attached to it. An embarrassment. There were no visible displays of pornographic material within the wings. It wasn't the case either that this was because of Catholic conservatism as had existed in the early 1970s when there was a ban on pornographic material being held in the prison. During the period I'm speaking of there was no ban on it, no directive from the camp staff saying that men were not allowed to read pornography. But the process of conscientisation that had been ongoing in the camp led men to the belief that they shouldn't promote or use pornography. However, a paper that female comrades in Maghaberry prison wrote on the issue of pornography in Long Kesh prompted heated debate among us, some of it along the lines of who were the women in another prison to tell men what to do regardless of the issue. The heated discussions around pornography highlighted for us just how deeply some men still held to conventional notions of masculine identities.

SS: And according to Joanna, the course had long term implications for the men who participated in it, providing them not only with theoretical insights but also with practical tools for working alongside women and dealing in a constructive manner with the complexities of gender roles and relationships.

LM: Yes, some time after the course had ended Joanna wrote that “the Women’s studies class was good training for effective working within community organisations on the outside. Men who had been through this process could work and do work well alongside women in the community.” I think this has been borne out in examples I have personally seen since being released and I know that in my own work it is more often women I come into contact with as women have been to the fore in community regeneration and development. I think the prison experience in itself would have assisted in breaking down gender roles and barriers to good work practice between women and men but the involvement in the women’s studies class greatly enhanced that.

SS: Obviously when we are talking about transforming conventional understandings of what it means to be a man in a particular context, we are not talking about transformations that happened over night. The processes you describe in your paper and in the thesis are not linear but rather quite complex and multi-layered. One such process involves the exploration of creative energies and venues through poetry workshops and other activities

LM: I think that our ability to express ourselves creatively was another by-product of what we experienced in the women’s study classes. Poetry workshops established in 1988 provided another opportunity for men to express a side of their lives that until then had been hidden. The poetry workshops, like the introduction of the principles of Freire years earlier, opened up a volume of creative ideas and unleashed a tide of emotional outpourings that previously had been hidden. We discovered that there were secret poets scattered around the camp. Men who had been writing poetry for some years but who had kept it hidden for fear of being exposed to ridicule. Things men had been reluctant to talk about over the years were suddenly verbalised through verse. The material men wrote in the workshops was compiled and put into pamphlet form and distributed around the camp. Nothing was anonymous, names were put to the poems. In that way men took control and ownership of their words and thoughts and that was a powerful exercise. It introduced the concept of us taking control of what was written about us. Instead of allowing others to interpret our lives and attempt to analyse what exactly we were about, what we thought and how we thought it, here we were putting down in black and white just exactly what we were. We were taking control over our own lives. We were writing our own history.

SS: From the poetry workshops arose the idea for a magazine you founded and was explicitly designed to raise controversial topics and a critical reflection upon commonly held republican beliefs, including conventional conceptions of masculinity, femininity and gender relations and roles

LM: The magazine, which we began in 1989 was entitled *An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice*. It contained prose, poetry, satire, short stories, puzzles, and artwork. The magazine, which went on sale to the public, has been produced three times a year since then, covering topical issues for prisoners and their families and also raising other issues that could be seen as controversial within republicanism, including; relationships with partners and wives the issue of gay republican prisoners.

SS: As part of your discussion of projects that marked this exciting period of creative expression, you mention a few more literary and artistic developments, which followed on from the creation of the *Glór Gafa/Captive Voice*.

LM: Yes, the first of these projects was the writing of *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle 1976-1981*, of which I was co-editor. The book contains accounts from 28 prisoners who experienced the blanket protest during 1976-1981 and some who were on the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. The book originally began in 1991 as a small pamphlet to commemorate the tenth anniversary of those who died on the hunger strike, but given the sheer volume of material that was written it was decided to publish a book. The accounts are often deeply personal, describing the experiences of the hunger strike, the emotions felt as comrades died, relations with families, and the frustrations, hope, despair and comradeship the prisoners experienced over those years. Other projects included the adaptation of Bobby Sands’s writings for a stage production entitled *The Crime of Castlereagh* and an audio cassette entitled, *Music From the Blocks*, which we recorded in prison and smuggled out to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the hunger strike.

SS: Taken together, how would you summarize the effects of these creative projects on your social and political transformation in general and on the emergence of new forms of masculinity in particular?

LM: All of these creative endeavours involved us opening up our lives, our thoughts, our desires and our aspirations to public scrutiny. In doing so we made ourselves vulnerable, exposed ourselves to the criticisms of others; enemies as well as comrades. But through that process we also made ourselves stronger. We realized that we didn't have to live up to some image of masculinity others defined for us. We began a process of reclaiming and re-defining our own masculinity - and femininity.

SS: I remember the first time you told me about the women's studies class and some of the critical discussions and processes that you were part of during your imprisonment, I found it difficult to conceive of such changes taking place in a prison. I think I have a better understanding now why, given the particular context of your imprisonment and resistance, Long Kesh became an ideal environment for the emergence of a unique community of men. Can you talk a little bit about what has happened to the process of re-defining masculinity upon your release?

LM: Our struggles didn't end upon leaving prison. Indeed for many, they just began all over again in a world that in so many ways reflects all that we have tried to leave behind us. But then it has only been through struggle and conflict that we have arrived at our present level of consciousness, a disjointed consciousness no doubt, but one that recognises that the only thing we have learnt is that we have so much yet to learn.

Postscript

When I started to share some of the stories captured in this article with colleagues in both feminist and peace studies circles, I encountered an initial surprise, followed by a genuine willingness to learn more. Then came the implicit accusation that I was romanticizing republican men! Their differences notwithstanding, both reactions underscore the fact that stories like that of the women's studies class in Long Kesh are unsettling in that they disrupt stereotypical portrayals of Irish republican prisoners that frame most scholarly and media accounts of the conflict. If the demonisation of certain groups passes as objective journalism and sound scholarship, it is not surprising that humanising such groups is often confused with romanticising them! The process of putting a human face on the diverse experiences of Irish republican prisoners by highlighting changes in their understandings of masculinity in the context of resistance has both political and theoretical implications. By illuminating aspects of the conflict in the North of Ireland that are often left unaddressed or reduced to a footnote, we hope to stimulate new thinking about the conflict in general and its gendered dimensions in particular.

Laurence's writings and my ongoing conversations with him, have called into question much of what I read about and my own earlier work on men and masculinity in the context of political conflict and resistance. Like many feminists, in an attempt to create space to highlight the multiple experiences of women and their various perspectives and ways of coping with conflict, I neglected to treat men and their experiences with similar subtlety. I wrote about constructions of militarised masculinity but I wasn't aware of the experiences of men who challenge conventional understandings of masculinity.¹³ I think that my initial position reflects in many ways the current state of feminist debates on this topic. With few exceptions, we have only just begun to pay attention to formations and transformations of masculinity in different settings and political contexts. We hope that this conversation will inspire future explorations of such topics.

Finally I want to end with a comment on the ethics and politics of writing this conversation. For quite sometime, I have been searching for ways to write about gender and the politics of resistance without appropriating other people's struggles. Still, I chose not to situate myself within this conversation. I did so mostly because I wanted the focus to remain on Laurence's stories and analysis. Michelle Fine uses the phrase "writing against othering" to mark a space for research filled with ethical and epistemological questions and designed to promote social and political change.¹⁴ For Fine, writing against othering entails "rupturing narratives."¹⁵ Such a project, she argues "allow[s] us to hear the uppity voices of informants and researchers who speak against structures, representations, and practices of domination. In these texts,

researchers are working the hyphen, reconciling the slippery constructions of Self and Other and the context of oppression in which both are invented."¹⁶ I am not sure that I know how to work the hyphen but maybe part of learning to write against othering involves simply admitting that. Few academics would conclude an article this way. Maybe that's why I should humbly borrow Laurence's conclusion to the conversation and admit that the most important thing I have learnt in the process of writing this piece is that I/we have so much yet to learn.

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¹ Laurence McKeown, "Unrepentant Fenian Bastards!: The Social Construction of An Irish Republican Prisoner Community." Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation. Queens University, Belfast, September 1998.

² Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴ Brian Campbell, Laurence McKewon and Felim O'Hagan eds., *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle 1976-1981*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994, pp. 90-92.

⁵ Quoted in Padrig O'Malley, *Biting At the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990). The original article written by Laurence McKeown was smuggled out of the Maze/Long Kesh prison and published in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* in 1986.

⁶ David Bresford, *Ten Men Dead*. London: Grafton Books, 1987, pp. 164-165.

⁷ O'Malley, op. Cit in note

⁸ Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. London & Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁹ Begona Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ Bersford op. Cit in note; Campbell op. Cit in note

¹¹ Bersford, *ibid.*, p. 275.

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1972.

¹³ For a more extensive discussion of this topic see my recent article "Gendering Conflict and Peace in Israel/Palestine and the North of Ireland," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 4 (1998), pp. 1061-1089.

¹⁴ Michelle Fine, "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research," in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, California: Sage, 1994, p. 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*