

Book Review: Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland: Women, Political Protest and the Prison Experience by Azrini Wahidin

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In **Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland: Women, Political Protest and the Prison Experience**, Azrini Wahidin draws upon the voices of female former combatants in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to challenge the silencing of their experiences both during the Troubles and in the subsequent peace process, with particular emphasis upon their memories of imprisonment. Based on extensive research, this seminal text is a stimulating, intimate and at times poignant read that underscores the crucial role of female ex-combatants both during the Conflict and in peace-building, finds Ashleigh McFeeters.

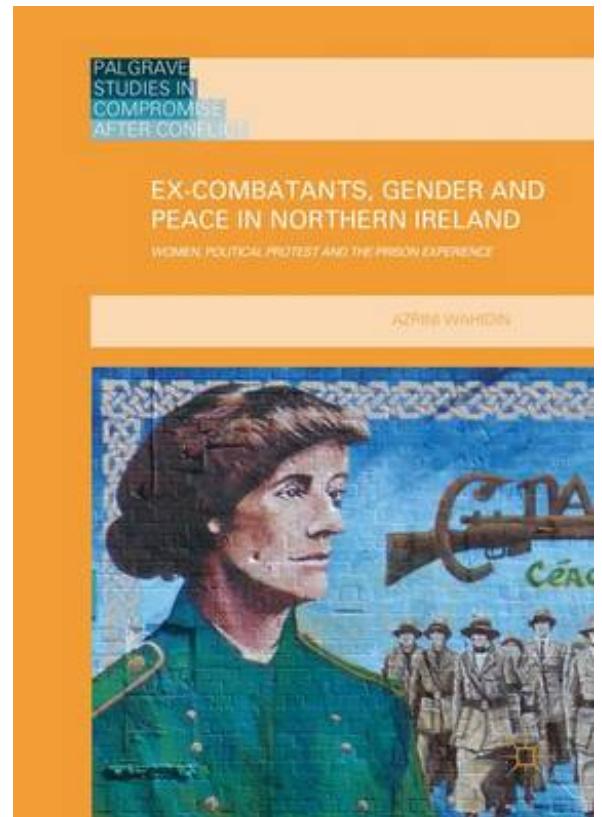
Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland: Women, Political Protest and the Prison Experience .
Azrini Wahidin. Palgrave. 2016.

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Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Azrini Wahidin has carried out considerable research into women's experiences in prison. In this new pivotal investigation, *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland: Women, Political Protest and Prison Experience*, she sets out a comprehensive account of female Republican volunteers' experiences during and after the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

As conflict studies are so often written from the viewpoint of a masculine norm, this study is highly illuminating and greatly needed. In the reality of the Troubles, these women did not simply play an auxiliary or 'footnote' role as is often believed, but rather were 'every bit as revolutionary as Irish men and their resistance every bit as fierce' (1). This book presents the reality of female combatants' active and agential roles to 'disrupt the silence' (2) surrounding women's participation in the IRA. The research navigates layers of political violence/protest, imprisonment and post-conflict reconciliation in order to understand the 'construction and experience of gender under conditions of struggle' (2). This is important as gender is a category of experience through which individuals interpret meaning, and its significance intensifies during periods of conflict and social upheaval.

The methodology of ethnographic interviewing allows female former combatants to speak freely of their experiences in their own words; it is upon their first-hand narratives that Wahidin's academic interpretation is built. The scope of the interview data, alongside the dexterous cultural and political theorising of Wahidin, produces robust and thought-provoking findings that make for compelling reading for students and academics focusing on societies undergoing post-conflict reconciliation, political history, gender studies or transitional justice law as well as for policymakers and government officials.



The book is organised into chapters dealing with the traditional association of women and peace; the (re-)negotiation of gender during war; the context of Northern Ireland's conflict; women's involvement in direct political action; the rise and dissolution of Cumann na mBan (the women's organisation in the IRA); women's impressions of Armagh prison; their acts of resistance within the prison; the gendered experiences of the no wash protest, the hunger strike and strip-searching; the female former combatants' attitudes towards the Good Friday Agreement; and finally, the role of ex-combatant women in post-conflict Northern Ireland. These offer a holistic approach to comprehending gender by guiding the reader along a detailed timeline of political activism and struggle, imprisonment and the pathway to peace. Two of these chapters are summarised below.



Image Credit: Belfast Mural (CC BY SA 3.0)

Chapter Eight, 'Parthas Caillte [Paradise Lost]: The Politics of Resistance and the Role of the Gendered Incarcerated Body', explores the no wash protest and hunger strike in Armagh Prison. The interviews reveal that the women were forced into the dirty protest due to the toilets being locked, rather than as a straightforward reaction to the criminalisation of political prisoners and the removal of special category status in 1976. The testimonies of the women are analysed to show how the practicalities of not washing for the women differed substantially from the men: for example, the women had to cope with menstruation. This became a tool of political struggle as menstrual blood was re-appropriated in their cells to refashion them as sites of resistance. Moreover, Wahidin interprets this re-appropriation as a means to dismantle femininity and 'reinsert the sexed body into the military struggle from which it had largely been erased' (159).

In Chapter Nine, 'The 'Norms of "Our Conflict": The Use of Strip Searching as Gendered Punishment', female former prisoners recount the emotional and physical trauma of being forcibly strip-searched. The author records and thoughtfully analyses the first-hand experiences of the women to challenge the official discourse surrounding strip-searching (174-77). The statements reveal lapses in, and the flagrant disregard of, procedure, where the strip-searches were used to humiliate, intimidate and degrade the prisoners rather than as an extreme security measure. One testimony reads: 'humiliation. I mean it's about control' (173). Wahidin's findings are furthermore important for providing evidence to hold authorities to account for misconduct during the Troubles.

Wahidin determines that gendered expectations of the female body were used against the women to terrorise them into submission: 'the British Government is using women's nakedness to tyrannise us' (172, original emphasis). The researcher deduces that the strip-searching was exploited as a weapon to defamiliarise and alienate the women

from themselves in order to '*break the struggle from within*' (173, original emphasis). The women felt additionally vulnerable as there was 'a sexual connotation attached to the searches, particularly where women were held down by men to be stripped' (174). One ex-prisoner likens the experience to '*being raped*' (186, original emphasis). Wahidin concludes that the strip-searches acted doubly as weapons of war: psychologically by fostering a culture of shame that estranged the woman from their bodies and from their communities, and physically by forcing a self-induced passivity in order to protect the most vulnerable and private of spaces.

There are references to how the strip-searches of the women were different to that of their male counterparts: 'there is something more psychologically severe [...] than it was for men' (174); 'you're anally and vaginally searched' (179). Wahidin acknowledges that the book makes no claim to cover male experience; however, it does raise questions about how the male political prisoners experienced the strip-searching from a gendered point of view. Did the sexual undertones of the strip-searches apply to the male prisoners as with the females? Wahidin's research inspires investigation into whether the masculine body experienced gendered punishment in a manner akin to the feminine.

Although the book clearly states that its focus is addressing the 'lacuna surrounding the role women played in the IRA' (5), it also encourages and paves the way for the same rich analysis of female Loyalist ex-combatants. The book states that Loyalist women did not suffer as Republican women did with regards to strip-searching in prison (174). Equivalent research in which female Loyalist ex-combatants could voice their own versions of incarceration (by the state for which they supposedly fought) would therefore be highly beneficial to observe whether the brutal treatment of the Republican women was interwoven with gender and political ideology. However, [Sandra McEvoy \(2009\)](#) and [Miranda H. Alison \(2009\)](#) both note the reluctance of Loyalist women to engage with interviews.

Nevertheless, Wahidin's thoughtful interpretation may inspire these women to have their voices heard as well.

Wahidin's extensive research is a stimulating and at times heart-rending read. It deftly balances the intimate and personal accounts of the women with academic scrutiny in order to help the reader understand the meaning of gendered resistance and the consequences of gendered violence. It avoids the voyeurism of suffering or cloying sympathy by carefully interpreting the meaning behind the women's words and actions.

What is significant about this research is that it is providing a much-needed foundation for a focus on women's experiences of political struggle from the perspective of former combatants rather than on women as victims of war or peacemakers. Post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation require ex-combatants and ex-political prisoners to be part of the peace process, and Wahidin's exploration highlights the neglected role of female former combatants and their gendered experiences of fighting, prison and involvement in conflict transformation. The final chapter puts across the attitude that as these women were part of the conflict, they must also be part of the peace process.

In *Ex-Combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland*, Wahidin uses interviews to expose the intimate and poignant accounts of the prison experience through a gendered lens. The book brings to the fore the significance of gender during political struggle, and asks that women not be a footnote, but rather mainstreamed in political reconciliation processes. It is a must-read to understand the integral role that female combatants had during the conflict and that female ex-combatants must have during social transformation for a solid and lasting peace. Wahidin's work is a seminal text that should be read by everyone studying post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building.

Ashleigh McFeeters is a third-year PhD student at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work. The doctoral research examines the role of the news media in peace-building in post-conflict societies with a focus on female ex-combatants. Her research interests include gendered terrorism, former combatant's roles in conflict transformation, women and peace-building and the news media and peace/conflict. She tweets @Aisleagh. [Read more by Ashleigh McFeeters](#).

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