

‘Time stands still’

The forgotten story of prisoners’ families

compiled by

Michael Hall

ISLAND (95) **PAMPHLETS**

Published May 2010 by
Island Publications / Farsset Community Think Tanks Project
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey BT36 7JQ

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<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications/>

cover photograph (of Crumlin Road gaol) © Michael Hall

ISBN 978-1-899510-88-7

*The group behind this initiative emerged from the 'Competent Helper'
course run by ICPD (Institute for Counselling & Personal Development),
under the stewardship of Prof. Chris Conliffe and John Foster*

The facilitating group
(Issac Andrews, Gerry Foster, Tommy Hale, Fra Halligan and Gerald Solinas)
represented the following organisations:

Teach na Failte (ex-INLA prisoner support group)

An Eochair (ex-OIRA prisoner support group)

Prisoners in Partnership (ex-UDA prisoner support group)

The facilitating group wish to thank the women who participated in the discussions which form the basis of this pamphlet for their willingness to share their recollections and their emotions so honestly and so openly.

The organisers wish to thank Farsset International for their ongoing support

Finally, the group wish to thank the **Good Relations Unit** of **Belfast City Council** for their assistance in funding this pamphlet



Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

In 2009 Republican and Loyalist ex-combatants from three different prisoner-support organisations – *Teach na Fáilte* (ex-INLA prisoners), *An Eochair* (ex-Official IRA prisoners) and *Prisoners in Partnership* (ex-UDA prisoners) – engaged in a series of frank and open discussions about their experiences of imprisonment during the course of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’. (See Island Pamphlet No. 92, *Preventing a return to conflict*.)

As well as endeavouring to extend the cross-community engagement which had long been developing as part of the ‘peace process’, a major purpose behind the discussions was to assist the ex-prisoners in their grassroots work with Protestant and Catholic working-class youth. In particular, they wished to respond proactively to the concern they had that many young people, unaware of the brutal realities of conflict and imprisonment, had romanticised the conflict and were voicing an increasing acceptance of violence as an outlet for their sense of alienation.

The ongoing work with young people has already achieved remarkable success, particularly in challenging –indeed, changing –attitudes and mindsets. ‘Shared history’ excursions to different venues around Ireland have given the young people a better appreciation of their commonalities, while visits to jails in Belfast and Dublin have provided a stark reminder of the harshness of incarceration.

In an effort to further consolidate this work –and also in response to a comment made by the wife of one ex-prisoner that ‘the story of the families is still to be told’ –it was decided to engage a number of female family members in a separate series of discussions, focusing on the many difficulties they faced when a son, husband or brother was imprisoned as a result of the conflict. This pamphlet provides an edited account of those discussions.

Note: Each quote in this document is preceded by two capital letters. The first letter indicates whether the person speaking is a relative of a Loyalist prisoner [L] or a Republican [R]. The second denotes the speaker’s relationship to the prisoner: mother [M], wife [W], sister [S] or daughter [D].

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'Time stands still'

The impact of imprisonment

Although the Troubles engulfed whole communities, leading to more and more individuals becoming involved as combatants, on a personal level it was still a shock when a loved one was arrested and imprisoned.

[RW] My husband was arrested during the Falls Curfew and spent two years in Crumlin Road jail. I was left to rear my three kids on my own. I didn't get any prisoners' aid. I got £7 from social security. I put in for a [special needs] payment for warm clothing for the children but was turned down. I appealed it and got £3! I just kept going. Well, you had to, there was nothing else for it. I wasn't the only one, there was hundreds of people in the same situation. He eventually got released, but was only out two weeks when he was lifted again and this time interned. I will never forget that day. It was Mother's Day and he comes in and says, 'I'll go out and get a wee drink to celebrate.' I told him it wasn't necessary but he insisted. He went out and didn't come back! What happened was that he went to an off-licence, and bought two bottles of beer for me and two bottles of Guinness for himself. Now some incident had taken place and any men in the streets were being stopped and questioned by the Army. When the patrol radioed through his name and it came back that he was a Republican, they just took him away and interned him on the prison ship.† When I went to see him he could barely walk. But he never spoke about anything that was done to him. When I questioned him he would say, 'Just forget about it.' After I came out from seeing him, the guy in charge of the ship sent for me. And I said, 'Jesus, what's next?' But the guy said, 'It's just to hand your husband's property over to you.' My two bottles of beer and his two bottles of Guinness! I said to this man, 'Do you know something? That's what he was arrested for, because he went to get me and him a wee drink. He didn't do any wrong, didn't do anything.' And I had to sign for those four bottles.

[LW] When my husband first went into prison we had only been going together about three years. We didn't have children together, although my husband has children from a previous relationship. His going to prison made a huge impact on my life. I was born and reared on the Shankill; my father was a worker all his days and none of my family were ever involved in anything political. So

† *HMS Maidstone* was used for a time as a holding centre for internees. It was moored in Belfast harbour, and in 1972 seven IRA members swam 300 yards through icy water in a successful escape.

whenever my husband was arrested, I sat wondering: how am I going to tell my family that he could end up in jail? Luckily they supported me, but it was traumatic having to tell my parents. Also, I had to build up some sort of relationship with his children, and try to keep them in touch with their daddy. Two of them were very young and it wasn't practicable to bring them on visits, but one was older so I would have taken her. And you try to hide your circumstances from people, apart from close friends. I worked in a Catholic area in a place where I was the only Protestant. I needed to change my working hours – so that I could go to the jail at 2 o'clock in the afternoon – so I had to explain the situation to my boss, and trust that he would keep it to himself. And I had to try and keep my circumstances a secret from my work colleagues. Yes, it certainly had an impact.

[RW] We weren't married at the time, just living together. One child. I was never politically aware; even now, I don't know much about politics, I'm not that interested to be honest. I knew he was involved in something when I first met him, but I never really asked any questions. Then when he got lifted I found out I was pregnant with our second child. That made things worse. The immediate impact was devastating. He got twelve years and done six. Every time you went up to see him you were searched. Some of the screws were alright, but some were really nasty. He was in Crumlin Road for a while and then he was moved to Long Kesh.† He was there at the time of the break-out, although because he was in the INLA he had to stay in his cell. When it was over the police came with dogs and they had to run, the dogs biting them and things like that. So you were worried sick about what might be happening to him.

[LW] I was only married three weeks and expecting whenever he went to jail. I couldn't afford to live on my own, so I went back to live with my mummy and daddy. It was difficult; I couldn't go to work because when he was on remand you had visits three times a week.

And because I had so little money I had to rely on my family to help with parcels and things. But they supported me, and that's how I got through it. But it definitely made a big impact on my life. I was only eighteen, my husband only twenty. And people often only found out much later the impact it had on their children. For example, I never knew

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† There were four prisons where combatants were detained: Crumlin Road (Belfast), the Maze or Long Kesh (10 miles from Belfast), Maghaberry (20 miles), and Magilligan (70 miles).

[RM] Soon after the Troubles really started the security forces came into this area and lifted a lot of men. They came into my house and took away two of my sons and my husband. They had them three days – took them to Hollywood Barracks. Now, one son was sixteen, the other seventeen. And they finally moved the younger one to Crumlin Road jail. And when I went up to see him in the jail his exact words to me were: ‘Did you bring me any cigarettes?’ And I said, ‘Son, I didn’t. I didn’t know what to bring.’ Now, I will give the screw his due, but he came over to me and he says, ‘Here, I’ll give him a couple of these, and I’ll light one up for him.’ The screw also told me that my son was too young to be in there, they would have to let him go. And within twelve hours he was let out. They never even contacted us to tell us, though, they just threw him out onto the Crumlin Road. Now, God help him, but the Troubles were getting bad and he could have been murdered. I remember him saying to me, ‘Ma, it was terrible what they were doing to the fellas in there. Beating them and all, it was awful.’ It must have been terrible on him having to witness that. I remember my husband saying to me, ‘When they told me to do something I done it, because when I seen what they were doing to the ones who refused, I just done what I was told.’ The older boy wasn’t released until later.

[LM] I can remember right from the start of the Troubles and my sons were just coming up to an age when they could have got involved in the paramilitaries. At that time I was a bit bitter myself about what was going on, but I never thought that anything would ever happen to any of mine. But one of them got a life sentence... and even to talk about it now makes me a bit tearful. I wasn’t very well at the time and when I heard how long he was going to be in prison I couldn’t accept it. I took a lot of tablets, I done a lot of things that I wouldn’t normally have done because of what happened to him. I was heartbroken but at the same time in a way I was proud of him because he thought he was doing something for his country. And I think most of the boys then thought they were doing something for their country. But when I went up to see him in prison I had to tranquillise myself, because I couldn’t accept where he was and the length of time that he was going to be away from me. To me, it was as if he had died. Even when I was putting out dinner plates for the other children I was putting a plate out for him too.

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[RM] Then the Troubles got worse and worse, and my older boy kept getting lifted. Indeed, our house was always getting raided, the Army and RUC hardly ever stayed away from here. The oldest one in particular was tormented by

them. He couldn't sleep in the house, he'd go to somebody else's house, then maybe another. God help him but he was tortured by them. Then finally he was taken away and put into Long Kesh, for three and a half years. But I still got raided. Some nights you didn't know whether to go to bed or not. There was always a fear there, a fear that they would come and take away my other sons. And, sure enough, one by one they were all lifted: eventually I had sons in the Crumlin Road, Long Kesh and Magilligan –at the same time!

[RW] Often you couldn't afford to buy parcels, you had to go and borrow money from someone, usually from his family. He got PDF [Prisoners Defence Fund] every Thursday, it was £7, but by the time Monday came you had the £7 spent, so you had to go and borrow again. We were able to keep our relationship going, there was always something there. Don't ask me what it was, but there was something there. Then when the kids got older it was getting more awkward. I tried to get a job but I couldn't get baby-sitters, so had to stay in the house. And the Troubles were still going on all around you. He missed all the wee family things: their first day at school, and things like that. And the kids were the same; they missed out on all those important occasions.

[RS] My brother was lifted on my seventeenth birthday and I will never forget it. He had been living out of the home and we hadn't seen him for a hell of a long while. Then he turned up one night –that was the norm. You wouldn't see him for a while, we didn't know what he was doing; I certainly didn't know. But he turned up that Monday night and the house was raided a few hours later and he was lifted, and was away then for the next eight years. Now, I was in sixth year in school and whenever he was charged and put in Crumlin Road prison my elderly father – he was in his seventies – said: 'What are we going to do? Who's going to go up and see him?' And it just seemed the normal thing for me to say: 'Well, I'm not going to go back to school. So, don't worry, dad, I'll be there to go up and see him.' And that wasn't forced on me, it was just a natural instinct. I remember when I said that my daddy breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that I would be able to go up and visit him: he wouldn't be stuck if he needed anything, I would always be available to go up. My education was put on hold... permanently. Thirty years later I might ask myself: what if I had've gone back to school? I could even say that I *should* have gone back to school, finished my education. But I can't say that. That was the way things were. I was going to be there for my brother and I am happy that I was. I don't regret it, I don't say to myself: God, all those wasted years... for it just seemed the natural thing to do at the time. My brother was put in prison for eight years, and, by God, his family were going to be there for him.

[RW] It was harder for parents. My husband's mother –she's dead now, God bless her –but she went every day to the Crumlin Road court along with me, she never missed a day, she stood by him. You just had to cope. You never saw it as a burden. You *had* to do it, you wouldn't let them down, so you just done it.

[LM] My other children suffered a lot due to the way that I was getting on because he was in jail –I actually ended up in hospital a few times because of the stress I was under. They didn't tell me until years later; but they said they felt I had put them to one side and had just been thinking about him all the time.

[RS] I remember that night my brother was lifted. Everyone was in an awful state. He was taken to Musgrave Street police station and badly beaten. I was married with one kid and then it was a matter of organising visits. When he was on remand we went three times a week to visit him. It was really hard for my father, because after our mother died he had been left to rear three children – three, eight and eleven years of age. So he reared us. My whole life was him.

[RW] I thought it was very hard, because at that stage I had to bring up five boys, and having to take them with you everywhere you went. You were left with no money, you had to do it all yourself, there was nobody there to help you. My family understood him being inside, he was inside because of the supergrasses.† As one supergrass was pulling out of it there was another one to take his place – there were so many at that time. He was getting out of jail and then being lifted again. You were constantly up and down to the Crumlin Road jail, and in and out of court. From '83 until he finally got out in '86.

[RS] I was seventeen and my elderly father definitely didn't have much money. My sister was married, and her husband had a good job, and it was she who really pulled us all through the eight years. I was unemployed and on the dole. I knew my daddy didn't have much, and he let us know he didn't have much. When we eventually got the Green Cross money from the local republicans, it was a Godsend. I was only on £9 a week unemployment benefit and I had to make sure that I kept about £2 aside out of my dole money to fund the extra parcel costs. Now, my father would never have known that. The only thing my brother needed was new clothes and they weren't the expensive ones. But if he needed anything, like clothes or paints for the art classes, we got it between us. We always managed it.

[RS] It was hard. The rest of the family didn't have much and so any time I would have visited them I would have brought some groceries, you know, just to help them get through. But that's what families are for. My daddy was good to us in rearing us; that's the way I look at it.

[RW] Even though he was inside, the house was constantly raided. Anything ever happened you knew you were going to get raided right away.

[RS] Before he went in we were raided maybe every fortnight. Once a new regiment arrived into the area we knew we were going to be raided at four in the

† In 1982/83 police use of over two dozen informers ('supergrasses') led to the conviction of some 600 members of Republican and Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Most of these were released on appeal and the system itself was ended in 1985.

morning, which wasn't nice. You were always waiting for the battering on the front door; it was quite frightening. And my school-bag was always searched.

[RW] You just kept to within the Republican community – other families who had men inside. Nobody else really knew anything about your real circumstances. Often they had no interest. As long as it didn't come to their doors. As long as it wasn't their sons.

You just kept to within the Republican community. Nobody else really knew anything about your real circumstances. Often they had no interest. As long as it didn't come to their doors. As long as it wasn't their sons.

[RW] I must say that the shopkeepers within the community were really good to people in our situation, for many families had loved ones interned. The butcher for one was really helpful. Now, we didn't get food for nothing, but he gave it to people at a reduced price. Then there was a man and wife who had a wee shop which sold clothing, and they would have give us socks and things... you couldn't have asked for better people.

[RS] You just focused. Our men were out to protect our community and we supported them. That was our reality. We knew why they were in there; you just wished it wasn't your husband, son or brother who was in. But that was life in our community – that was the way it was.

[RW] Now, he never said to me what happened to him, but years later wee bits and pieces came out. He was subjected to sleep deprivation, and constant noise. Then they were blindfolded and put into helicopters. They were told they were hundreds of feet up in the air and then they were pushed out! In actual fact the helicopter had come back down to a half-dozen feet or so off the ground. Now, think of what they went through during that experience! Jesus! Think of what was going through their minds. And yet he never ever talked about what he had went through. It only began to come out bit by bit much later.

[LM] My son got seventeen years. I think there was a lot of the mothers thought they would never see their sons out again. I happened to have the radio on, and didn't even know his case was up in court that day. And when I heard that he got a stipulated sentence, I squealed the place down, and the neighbours came running in to see what was wrong with me. I just couldn't believe it.

[LW] You never expect that your husband is going to jail. You don't expect that. You don't want to think that far ahead. You know there's a possibility they could, but you always hope it won't happen. I think it's even harder on a mother for her son to go inside: I remember my husband's mother saying to me that it just broke her heart. It got to the point she even found it hard to go on a visit. Because sometimes when she would have went up they would have been sitting

with black eyes, wrists swollen out to here when they would have got beatings by the prison staff. I think for a mother it is harder. No matter what age they are they're always going to be your wee children.

[RW] But, we got to live through it and we raised our kids; we had another two children after he came out. I just told the children: 'Your daddy hasn't done any wrong, he hasn't done any harm to anybody; it's just the way it is in this country.' We were living in a housing estate at that time. Now, I had been offered an old farm outside Belfast; they owned horses, and if I looked after them I wouldn't be charged any rent. I had more or less turned it down, but it was still open to us. Then our eldest son – he was thirteen – came in one day and said, 'Mummy, am I a Stickie† or a Provie?' I said, 'You are a Catholic, son, and that's all you need to be.' After he said that I sat down and said to my husband, 'I'm going to take up that offer in the country and move ourselves away to hell out of here.' Which we did. We moved out of Belfast and took on the farm. It was hard. For a start there was no electricity; I had to take the battery out of the car and wire up a light from it. But I was so glad to get them away out of Belfast. Also, the hunger strike was on and I did not want any of my kids to be affected by the emotions being stirred up at that time. So I just up and went to this house in the country which had no electricity, it had nothing really. It was hard on my kids, they had to rise at half six in the morning for the bus to get to school. But they have got through it, they have all married now, bought their own homes and are all doing well. If I had stayed in Belfast I don't know what would have happened, the boys might have got involved in what was going on. It wasn't the neighbours we wanted away from –it was the politics.

Prison visits

Prison visits were times of stress – the hassle of getting to the prison, the cold treatment by the prison system, the heartache of the visit itself – but also times of renewed support from the other families.

[LM] The way we were treated, the visitors, when we were going up to see our sons, wasn't very nice.

[LW] I found that very difficult too. As far as I was concerned we were all victims of circumstance –the wives, the mothers, the partners –but we were treated as if we were dirt on the shoes of the screws –prison warders, whatever you want to call them.

[LW] The prison authorities were really ignorant to you: 'That's not allowed in,

† Nickname given to supporters of the Official wing of the IRA, after they began to wear self-adhesive Easter lily badges at Easter Rising commemorations, as opposed to supporters of the Provisional IRA who sported paper-and-pin badges.

nor that...' with no explanation as to why it wasn't. And rather than saying, 'Excuse me, you can't send that in', they kind of just threw it back at you.

[RS] It used to upset us when they were examining the kids. Even a newborn baby, they would search its nappy. That was awful.

[LW] You used to stand outside the Crumlin Road jail waiting for your visit. Right on the Crumlin Road. And at first I would be embarrassed standing there, because cars were driving up and down, and you're standing there in a queue. Apart from the stigma that was attached to going to the jail, you didn't want to be recognised... I worked in a Catholic area, the only Protestant, and I'm trying to look away as cars were going past. No shelter, no nothing, and they never opened that gate until 2 o'clock on the button. Then when you got in, it could sometimes take an hour by the time you booked your parcel in and got searched. And there was no pleasantness, no civility about the prison staff. And these

were men standing there with 'Ulster' tattoos on their arms, men who lived in the area, so any preconceived notions that Nationalists might have that the Loyalist community was treated differently, they can forget it – we certainly were not. I was always there early, I would have been the first in. I thought: if I get in early few cars will see me going down the road. One day I sat nearly

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two hours in a tiny waiting room and I kept asking them: 'Look, is my visit not called?' At ten-to-four they come to me and told me I wasn't getting a visit, because he was away to Castlereagh or that he was 'on the boards'.† Yet they could have told me that at 2 o'clock at the gate.

[RM] I hated the travelling; it always seemed so far to Magilligan. Most days in the minibus, I was sick by the time I arrived. Then another of my sons was lifted and put in Crumlin Road. So between running from one prison to the other to visit them, there were days you were that tired. And at that time they didn't wash their own clothes, you had to do their washing and bring it up to them.

[LM] One thing I remember was that when I went to put my arms round him when I was leaving he pushed me away, and it wasn't until later that he told me in a letter the reason: he didn't want to break down in front of the other lads. And some of his letters and the things that he said would have broke your heart.

[RD] My mum was pregnant with me when my dad went inside. He got out

† A solitary confinement punishment block where all items of furniture had been removed from the cells. The prisoner was given a mattress in the evening but this was taken away each morning.

when I had just turned seven. I remember –although the memories are vague – going up to the jail every Monday to see him. I remember him giving me a hug and kiss, but, to be honest, at that time the big thing about prison visits was that I always got a bag of cheese & onion crisps, a Mars bar and a tin of Coke. To me, that was my Monday: to go up there and get that, rather than the emphasis on going up to see your daddy. I think it was probably because he went inside before I was born and I hadn't been able to establish a real relationship with him. I have other memories of when I was younger. Me, my mum and my sister all slept in the same bed. Although we had a spare room we never slept in it. We slept in the one bed, I suppose from a sense of security. But at the time the lack of a father figure didn't impact on me, the way it might have if I had known him before he went in. I can't remember whether I spoke about him in school. I know later on I would have told friends that he was inside, for there were a lot of my friends whose fathers would have been in jail as well. We were all in the same boat; most people to whom I might have said that my daddy had done time in jail would have told me that their father, or their uncle, or somebody close to them, had also done time.

We were all in the same boat; most people to whom I might have said that my daddy had done time in jail would have told me that their father, or their uncle, or somebody close to them, had also done time.

[LM] I can remember that, when visiting Long Kesh, you went inside this corrugated iron hut, and the floor was soaking, the wind was coming in, the place was freezing, there were no heaters or anything. And you sat there for ages before you were called in for your visit. And the way they called out your name you just felt as if you were dirt. I remember one time I sat down beside my son and the next thing was: 'Up! You're not allowed to sit there! Go to the other side of the table.' Nor was I allowed to put my hand out towards his or they would have been on top of me right away. They would probably have been thinking I was trying to pass him something. The visits were not nice. You tried to make something positive out of them, but they weren't nice at all.

[LW] I mean, I remember, when he went into jail, his friend saying to me: 'You'll get into a routine with the visits, don't worry.' And I thought: how would you ever get into a routine of going up to jail? But you *do* get into a routine, and your life becomes that visit, three times a week or whatever, and you build your life around it.

[LW] From '76 you were allowed to send in cooked meats, biscuits, apples, oranges; you were allowed to cook them steak and sausages and take up sixty cigarettes. But then they cut that out and after a while you weren't allowed all that food because people were smuggling things inside the food. But that was a hard time, whenever you had three parcels a week to get.

[RW] I just got on with things. His family were good, as were my own family, and one of them would have baby-sat. But you never had any money or anything. My own family hadn't known that he was in an organisation, but they were supportive of him –they used to say: well, at least he has a pair of balls. I never really bothered with anybody, just kept myself to myself. We used to go to the [Quaker-run] canteens and the kids would have played in the crèche there. And if you needed any help you would have gone to the organisation. But at the end of the day you just had to get on with things.

[LW] The organisation would have provided so much but there was so many men from the area inside you couldn't go to them all the time and say, 'Look, he needs new jeans.' And you felt like a beggar, so you wouldn't have done it. Nevertheless, in our area the organisation was very good with their prisoners' families. More so than with some other areas. And they would have bought them extra things, like at Christmas.

[LW] You were supposed to get a half-hour for visits, but you were lucky if you got that, you maybe only got twenty minutes. It depended on the mood of whoever was on, or if they were changing shifts. The worst times were when there was tension. He was in the Crum in the early '90s; that's when they started fighting quite seriously for segregation – the Crum then was a real hotbed. At times when the violence going on out on the streets was at its height I heard some families say that they felt almost relieved whenever their husband or son was put in prison because at least they knew where he was, but because of what was going on in the Crum at the time the fear factor was just as great for us. And you went up hoping he actually got to the visit without bumping into a Republican and getting into a digging match, because that was the Loyalist attitude then: see one, hit one –even though they were outnumbered three to one by Republicans. I spent my time listening to the radio to hear if more trouble had broken out.

[LW] An added problem during times when there was a lot going on inside the prison –or during the supergrass trials –was that visits were one of the few ways the men could communicate with the outside, and you maybe spent most of the time being told what was happening to certain prisoners, and acting as a carrier pigeon to take messages to people on the outside. Before you knew it your visit was over and you came out feeling you hadn't had a visit at all.

[LW] The ones with their husbands, partners or sons in jail, you sort of had the same circle of people and within that everybody helped each other. Times were hard. Maybe one wife was coming round to tell you something you had to tell somebody else, so everybody got to know everybody else. You also knew other wives from being on the visits, and you had laughs with them as well. If you hadn't had laughs you would have been driven insane.

[LM] I remember the bus breaking down on the way to Long Kesh, with everybody standing at the side of the road. And a van stopped and the driver

must have known who our driver was, for he said: ‘Tell them all to climb in the back.’ And we did, but there were no seats and we had to sit on the floor of the van and we were bumping around all over the place. You did have some nice things to remember, but most of what I can remember, from the start of the Troubles up until my son was released, was a nightmare. It was just a nightmare for me and it must have been the same for a lot of families – on both sides.

Most of what I can remember, from the start of the Troubles up until my son was released, was a nightmare. It was just a nightmare for me and it must have been the same for a lot of families – on both sides.

[LW] Yes, I can remember when the bus broke down and you had to get out and walk through the snow; and then when you arrived at the visitors’ canteen their water was froze and you got no tea. And you missed the morning visit and they wouldn’t let you in until the afternoon. And you had to wait there in the cold. So you were out of the house from eight o’clock that morning and weren’t getting your visit till the afternoon which meant you weren’t home to late in the day.

[LM] There was a protest, there was some Loyalists went on the same type of protest the Republicans went on. One of them was my son, and I remember some journalist coming and asking me if we had a photograph of him. I gave them one of him in his Army uniform. And the next night I saw it in the *Belfast Telegraph*. So I thought then, and his young sister thought, that he was going to do what the Republicans had done, and be on it until he died. And I had some job consoling her.... She cried her eyes out, sobbed her heart out. There were a lot of bad patches like that throughout the time that he was inside, and I had to get treatment because of my nerves and things. I can always remember having to take tablets before I could go to see him in prison.

[RW] I was really scared of the feuds. I remember one time there was a bitter feud going on but fortunately he was in jail at the time. Most of the friends that he and I knew are now all dead. So he was in the better place.

[LW] With only getting half an hour for your visit you didn’t get much of a chance to talk about anything other than family things, the weather –anything but problems at home.

[LW] Yes, your half hour was precious to you, so you didn’t want to talk about troubles, or any difficulties with the kids or whatever, everything was glossed over. Anyway, they were getting it tough enough within the system. The last thing you wanted to do was give them more anxiety. I mean, what could they do if your ceiling fell in? Nothing. So why tell them about it? What could they do about financial problems? Nothing. So why even bother them; they had enough trouble to worry about within the jail system, and to try and stay alive within it, especially in the Crum during the fight for segregation.

[RW] You never told them about problems at home. You kept everything to yourself. You always hid from them if you were going through any difficulties. Told them nothing.

[RS] But the men were the same. They never said anything was wrong inside. Everything was great. And yet there was a hell of a lot going on in there, and they never said a thing.

[RW] I never told him of any problems, just kept them to myself. There was no point in giving him any more worry. There were constant financial difficulties but I never told him. He just assumed that my mummy or his ones would have helped you out. And they did try to help, but it was hard for them too, for nobody had much money in them days. I don't think the prisoners were really aware of the burden on their families, I don't think they fully realised. To be honest, he would never ask for anything; the only thing he wanted up was the *Irish News*. We brought up a wee food parcel, biscuits and fruit. And his mummy was very good, she often brought parcels for him as well. So it wasn't too bad, but the kids and I still had it tight, and I didn't like borrowing from people all the time.

[LM] I remember one time he said to me: 'Mummy, could you afford to get me a gold chain for Christmas?' And I said to him: 'Do you realise how hard it is at home?' He couldn't understand how hard a life we were having. He didn't get his gold chain. And the parcels, they got very little. The boys were allowed to put money into savings. And I can remember he would have saved that up for his sister, she was very young then, and then sent it out for somebody to buy a Christmas present for her.

[RM] Not everyone wanted to 'stand by their man'. I went over to the wife of one of my sons to tell her that he had just been lifted. And when I said I would arrange for her to get the Green Cross, she said: 'You needn't get me any Green Cross, I won't be going to visit him, I'll not be making him parcels. He had no call to get himself into trouble.' Well, that hurt me. And she never did. Eventually him and her separated, and she's away now in Australia.

[RS] There was brilliant camaraderie between the relatives going up on the visits. We all looked out for each other. If anybody came out crying after seeing their loved one, we were over right away offering support.

[RM] I know I was doing things which I shouldn't have been. I was feeding lads who were on the run, letting them sleep in the house, letting them get washed, but that was all. The only other thing was that I got involved with the Green Cross, to try and help the ones inside. At first they started out with £3 a week, but that wouldn't have bought much. Then it went up to £8, although by that time a good lot were out and they could give more to the ones left inside.

[LW] On the more negative side, in a sense you're taken for granted. They just

assume that we'll manage somehow. How many of our husbands during the last twenty-odd years have turned round and said: 'How *did* you cope? What did you feel?' You couldn't go up to the jail and tell him that you lay in bed crying at having such a lonely life.

[LW] Which you did many a time.

You'd come walking home after a visit, and the tears tripping you as you walked down the Crumlin Road. You didn't want to cry during the visit because you didn't want to upset them.

[LW] They assumed that because you were able to carry on that everything in the garden was rosy. But it wasn't, it was far from rosy.

[LM] I think they thought that we were being well enough looked after, but nobody really came to your door. I can never recall anyone – except the paramilitary organisation – coming to my door to try and help in any way. I am Presbyterian and I remember asking my minister if he would go up to see my son. I kept asking my son: 'Has anybody from the church been up to see you yet?' For whenever you went up you seen priests going to see those on the Republican side; indeed, plenty of them going up to visit. But I never remember seeing any ministers up visiting. My minister didn't say he *wouldn't* go up, he just never bothered. We got a new minister and he eventually went up to see him. I can remember that for a long time, there was nobody, and the politicians didn't give a damn.

[LW] The paramilitary community – their wives, families – they looked after each other, and would have organised your visits. And your social life was just with the wives of the prisoners. But outside of that, if your neighbour had no connection with the paramilitaries they wouldn't really have bothered with you.

[LM] At the beginning of the Troubles, most people thought that they would have to become involved in what was happening in the country, but you never think of it coming to your own door, you never think of any of your children being taken away from you.

[LW] Looking back, you think: how did I do it? But you done it.

[RM] Nobody knows what we went through. Now, I didn't work, but to keep them all up with whatever they needed I had to go into work. But it was a constant strain. I was running to three prisons at

How many of our husbands have turned round and said: 'How did you cope? What did you feel?' You couldn't go up to the jail and tell him that you lay in bed crying at having such a lonely life.

It was a constant strain. I was running to three prisons at the same time. There were nights when I knelt at the side of my bed and asked God to give me the strength to get through another day.

the same time. I was running up to the Crumlin Road, to Long Kesh and to Magilligan. And there were nights when I knelt at the side of my bed and asked God to give me the strength to get through another day.

Returning home again

Readjustment to family life after a long spell of imprisonment could often throw up numerous problems, both for the ex-prisoner and his family members.

[LW] I lived with my parents while he was inside; then, about a year before he was released, we got our own house. But my daughter still stayed with my mummy and daddy; they were almost like her parents too. When her daddy came out she would only have stayed with us now and then. He was only out about six weeks when the house was shot up, and that was it –she wouldn't come back and live with us at all after that.

[LW] They find it strange at first when they come out. I think they lose all track of time while they're inside. Time stands still. And they still think to this day that the children are younger.

[RS] You'd almost think they still saw us all as the same age as we were when they went in.

[RW] Even in themselves, they stayed younger.

[LW] For some reason they think they are still twenty.

[LW] And kids often resent it when their daddy comes home: who's he to be telling me what I can or can't do? The children are used to the mother being the role model and the authority figure: she has been the one who set the ground rules, not him.

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[RD] My mummy had prepared us for when my daddy did eventually get out: he's going to be coming home in a couple of months, he's going to be living with us soon.... To us, it was a bit of excitement, and although it was so long ago now and I can't really remember back to then, but I think I was expecting some sort of Santa figure: life was going to be so much better financially, there was going to be a man in the house and we were going to have a new suite and all sorts of different goodies. And, to be fair, when he did get out things did drastically change. For the better. Obviously, there were things we found hard getting used. When he came out things started to be a bit more

regimented; he was quite strict about different things, and you maybe weren't as free to do things the way you would have done when there was just you and your mummy.

[LW] My husband does have a good relationship with his kids, but the father-daughter relationship that I had with my daddy, which was precious to me, I think is different to his.

[RS] When my brother was lifted we lived in one of the old housing estates, and during the eight years he was in prison our estate underwent redevelopment. The wee kitchen house that he was lifted out of was demolished and a brand new house with a bathroom built in its place. He came out to a totally different environment. I don't think he could cope with the changes for a while. On his first days out he and I just walked around the area because everything was so new to him.

[RW] My mum used to tell me: 'Keep those children quiet now, he's been used to the quiet in the Kesh, don't be letting them make a noise.' And I said, 'He's not been used to it! I had to get used to it for all these years without him, and he'll now have to get used to it too!' But I remember the day he got out of Long Kesh and I saw him walk down Leeson Street, and the sole on one of his shoes was flapping against the pavement. I will never forget that shoe.

[LM] He was a teenager when he went to prison, and when he came out he was a man. I thought I was never going to see him out. Now, thank goodness he *is* out, but he is a changed person. He is not the person he was when he went into jail. He used to be able to talk to us, have a laugh, carry on, but now when he comes to visit he doesn't seem to be able to talk to his father and me at all; it's just a quick run in and out. He doesn't seem to want us to talk about anything to do with the Troubles, he doesn't want to hear about it at all, about anything that has happened in the past. I thought that he would have needed a wee bit of counselling but he wouldn't have anything to do with it. So, at the minute... I would love him to open up and talk, but he won't. He is a changed person, and that upsets me a lot.

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[LW] Everything in their life is about their time inside, all their memories: 'When we were in jail, when we...' They don't seem to have any memories prior to that. If you're out with friends you would never hear them say, 'Me and her did this or that'... their talk is always about jail.

[LW] Before he went to jail, we had a great life, a ball, we really did; we would maybe have been out a couple of nights at the weekend, socialising here and there. But they come back out and despite their promises not to get involved again, they do, and you're back to square one!

[LW] That was my experience too. 'The next time I get out I'll spend all my time with you.' Not a bit of it! He was soon back associating with his mates.

[LW] When our husbands came out of prison we did have these high expectations: life was going to be better, things would be different. I think they meant well, but they just got re-involved again; they just picked up where they left off years before, because time had stood still for them.

[LW] First time he done four years, was out six months, went back for two. Then I think he was out for a year and he went back. And he was only out from that when he went back in again! Twelve years he done in total.

[LW] Mine went in in the late seventies. Did four years, and he was only out six months and went in and done another eighteen. Back in again, then in and out; his last was in 2003.

[RW] Once he came out he swore to me that he would never get actively involved again, and as far as I know he never did. He still talks politics with his friends. Talks and talks.

[LM] My son was inside seventeen years before he got any parole. And when he came out, I can remember that day clearly. Everybody was there to welcome him, but I was in hysterics, seeing him coming into the house. I saw him sitting with my daughter on his knee and the other children, and they were all crying. And he was promising what he would do to make up for the length of time he was away, but they don't seem to be able to keep their promises. I think it was because of what happened to him. I went through a very bad time. I actually done a life sentence along with him. And I would never like to see the rest of my children get involved in this type of thing. But at that time most of the lads got involved, there was very few didn't.

[LW] Very few. I think West Belfast had the highest ratio of ones in jail of the different areas. For such a small road, the like of the Shankill, they had the highest number of people from organisations inside.

[LW] My husband would tend to overcompensate by giving the kids too much money and I have to remind him that we don't always have it. His major, major regret is that he missed out on the kids growing up. He tries to make up now with the grandchildren, but if you were to ask him what was his major regret, it would be missing out on his girls. Don't get me wrong, he has a good relationship with them, but it's not the father-daughter bond he knows it could have been.

[RD] I remember when my daddy got out. I can laugh about this now, but I used

to suck a dummy right up until I was seven. And I remember my mummy saying to me: 'You're going to have to get rid of that dummy before your daddy gets out.' Any time we went up to jail she would never let me take one with me. And then when mummy threw them out I remember crying my eyes out, and feeling a bit resentful towards him: this is my dummy and just because he's out I have to throw it away! And I remember he found one at the back of the chair and I think it was the first time he ever shouted at me. I remember running out of our flat crying my eyes out, and hating the fact that he was out –over something as simple as throwing your dummy away!

[LW] If you asked my husband he would say he has lived his life. 'If I went tomorrow,' he would say, 'I have lived my life.' And sometimes I think that is selfish. It's only now the past eight to ten years that we have begun to do normal things, like go on holiday.

[LM] I kept saying 'sorry, I'm sorry'. I don't know how many times I've said that to the rest of my family. I think they lost out because of the way I was feeling about him. Especially the wee girl, because she was very young when it happened. I tried but he was always there in my mind. I thought I was doing all right for them until those years past and I realised what they lost out on because of him being in jail. I'm trying to make up for it now, especially with the youngest one, my daughter. Maybe I'm doing too much, and intruding into her life too much. I kept saying 'sorry' but, at the same time, do I really need to say 'sorry'? At that time I didn't know what was happening to me. The hurtful part is that I imagine the rest of my family are not able to talk to me the way they should be able to, because of what I went through when he was in prison. I imagine that they're now hiding things from me, and can't open up and talk to me in case they tell me something which would set me off worrying about them, or feel guilty again for not giving them the attention they should have got. I do still worry a lot about them all, but especially him: I would love to hear him opening up and telling me the way he feels, because I don't know what is going on in his mind.

[LW] In the early days there were no such thing as counselling services. And even the professionals who were there –doctors, teachers, others –hadn't a clue what to do for you, or often didn't want to know. We were largely abandoned by society.

[RW] I think the children were a bit scared of him when he eventually did come home. One thing he would have done was to go through cupboards –take everything out of them, then put everything back. That was when he came out, he's not so bad now. He said it was probably because he was confined in a small space and got so used to taking everything out of his prison cupboard and then putting it back again. This went on for about two years after he got out; I don't think he realised he done it.

[RD] One of the first things which also happened was that me and my sister got moved into the spare room. And that was the first time I had ever slept in that room, and I remember feeling afraid at not being with my mummy. And these were all things that made me slightly resentful towards him being there. My mum ended up going out to work and he stayed at home to look after us, but at times you felt you couldn't do anything, you were always getting shouted at – for he was much stricter than my mum. Sometimes when I am arguing with my dad –and I don't really mean to do this, for I know it winds him up –I'll say: 'Well, sure you weren't even there for me the first six years of my life, and those are the most crucial years.' Now, my father and my younger brother have a really close bond –my dad is the one who looks after him 24/7. And sometimes, even at the age of 27, I would be a bit envious at the closeness of their relationships, and think: well, I was never like that with him. It's not that I have lost anything, just that I never really got started on a proper father-daughter relationship until my late teens.

[LW] They know that they missed out on so much. And we missed out on all those things too. We sacrificed a big part of our lives because *they* become our lives. Many times I felt I was losing my own identity. I wasn't *me* any more, I was an extension of him. Your life is built around him.

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Experience of the 'other community'

How did the conflict impact upon attitudes and perceptions held about the 'other community'? What was the experience before the Troubles, and now?

[LM] We didn't bring our children up to be bitter; where we lived at the time they actually played across the road in Ballymurphy with Catholics; they were never ever brought up to be bitter. But when they were older they saw what was happening to their country, and that's why they got involved.

[RM] There was one wee woman I knew from the Shankill; she and I used to send each other Christmas cards, but that stopped a few years ago. I often wonder whether I should go up the Shankill and see if she is still alive.

[LW] My husband went to school in Somerdale, and had to pass Ardoyne every day. And their buses would get stoned and windows broken by Catholics. He lived on the Woodvale and as the Troubles got worse many of the men formed groups to defend the area, and that's how it snowballed. They thought that they were protecting their area and doing what was right for their country and

community. It was never about sectarianism. And they were young at the time. Okay, they're in their fifties now and their attitudes have changed; they'd turn round now and say, yes, looking back we'd probably try and do things differently. But they still have the same conviction that what they done at the time was for their community, and they believed it was right.

[RW] I have no contacts now with people from the Protestant community. In my younger days I worked with plenty of Protestants. My experience, however, wasn't always good. When I was about nineteen I worked for this handkerchief manufacturer. I had no problems with the Protestant girls I worked alongside, until it came to the Twelfth. And the whole place was coming down with flags and bunting; they even made a wee arch! Now, each worker had their own desk where they did their stitching or packing, and this bunting was put all over my desk too! And I said, 'I have no objection to you all having this stuff – but I won't have it over *my* desk. So, I won't be working today; I'll be back when that stuff is taken away.' And they took it down all right, but a month later I was sacked. They said there wasn't enough work to keep me going.

[RM] My husband was not a political man in any way. He had friends on the Shankill Road, he had friends in Sandy Row, and we often went over there. My milkman was from Sandy Row and he came in here to deliver my milk. My coalman was a Protestant and he came in here too. I was reared with Protestants all my life; I lived in Protestant streets, I lived down the Grosvenor Road in a mixed street. In fact, there may have been more Protestants in it than Catholics. When I got married I moved round into a Protestant street and I got on well with all my neighbours. There might have been one or two that were a wee bit bitter... but apart from them I got on well with everyone. In fact, the day I left to come up here, a few of the Protestant neighbours said to me: 'We're sorry you and your children are going; you're taking the light of the street with you.'

[LW] I had a really good Catholic friend years ago. After I left school I went to Rupert Stanley college in Tower Street, and there was a girl who went there, Carol, who was from Andersonstown. And me and her got on absolutely brilliant; me and her were always seen together. And when my son was born she was the first one at my door with a gift. Sadly, over the years we lost touch with one another.

[LM] I had plenty of Catholic friends at the start of the Troubles. But because of what happened, and having to move, you lost touch. And because of the Troubles you couldn't go to where they were living because you were afraid of somebody knowing your religion and maybe something happening. But through the years, despite what was going on, I still remained friendly with Catholics. It wasn't the ordinary Catholic person that I had anything against; it was the terrorists in the Provos. They were the ones I was really against, and still am in a way because of what happened to our country and to our husbands, brothers

and sons. And look where they are at the minute. They have got their place in government and they are trying now to tell us what to do, after trying to destroy our country. And because of them trying to destroy our country I lost my son... I mean, he's just not the same person, so it's like as if I have lost him.

[LW] We weren't sectarian in our family. It wasn't the ordinary Catholic we were against. I have worked with Catholics. It's like everything in life: there's good and there's bad, but the Republican element, the like of the Provos and what they stood for and what they wanted to do, that's what we were against. And that's one reason why we supported our husbands, because we could see where they were coming from.

[RM] One of my sons worked in Mackies and one day there was a bullet left on his workbench. I told him he wasn't going back. I went down and I took the bullet with me. I just walked in through the main gates and asked for the boss. I told him I was down to enquire about my son. I said, 'How did that bullet get put on his desk? Youse have a room in there and he's not allowed into it, but all the Protestants can go into it. Are they making bullets?' He said: 'How did you get in here?' I told him that I just walked in. I said to him, 'My son won't be back.' And he said, 'Well, he's a very conscientious worker and he's in here early every morning.' And I said, 'But what are you going to do about that bullet?' He said, 'That's got nothing to do with me.' So I wouldn't let him go back. And then I brought my other son out of it as well. So they lost their jobs.

[RS] I am glad to see it the way it is now. My husband worked with Protestants all his life, worked in Protestant areas. I have one granddaughter and she knows nothing about the Troubles. She used to go to a school near a Protestant area. She would see the Union Jacks as we drove past the Ravenhill Road, and she would say, 'God, look at all these flags, granny.' And I would say, 'But it's their festival, just like ours in another couple of weeks.' I would never turn round and say 'Prods' or 'Orangies' or anything like that there. I live in the Short Strand and we hear the bands, because we're surrounded by Loyalists. She hears them but doesn't ask anything. I prefer it being that way, and I hope all the children growing up now are the same. To me, it's a better way of life, a better way to be. Instead of walking into the town and grabbing your children in the middle of a bomb scare.

I am glad to see it the way it is now. To me, it's a better way of life, a better way to be. Instead of walking into the town and grabbing your children in the middle of a bomb scare.

[RW] My father-in-law is Protestant. We've all got mixed backgrounds. Having said that, you couldn't get a Catholic to go and live on the Shankill Road. Protestants would be safer on our side, than a Catholic living on their side.

[RS] I have uncles who were in the British Army; they were killed in the war.

[RS] When I was in Holland on a cross-community trip I was placed in a host-parent house with a Protestant girl. She was a year and a half older than me and she really looked after me, as if I was her wee sister.

[RS] I'm a care worker and for some years now I have been working with both sections of the community. And some of the Protestant families I visit know that my daughter is involved in Irish dancing. And I believe that they are genuine when they ask me, 'What about your wee girl –was she dancing somewhere at the weekend?' Indeed, most of the Protestant people I have worked with have showed me so much respect, at times more than the Catholic community, some of whom have treated me like a doormat, treated me like an absolute slave. I am proud that I have got a few of them interested in Irish dancing in a way they might not have been before.

[RW] There are an awful lot of bitter people out there. A hell of a lot of them.

[RM] A terrible lot of sad things happened. Many people suffered. And what people done to each other during the conflict was awful. But one side, I suppose, was as bad as the other.

A terrible lot of sad things happened. Many people suffered. And what people done to each other during the conflict was awful. But one side, I suppose, was as bad as the other.

[LW] We would have went to the Peace House. As the 'peace process' developed people would have brought Catholic and Protestant women to meet one another over a weekend in Corrymeela. However, we would have kept more to ourselves, and they would have kept more to themselves; we would have sat with them having a meal but that would have been it really.

Undiminished memories

Some of the family members recalled a few experiences – from the comic to the tragic –which they have never forgotten.

[RM] I had a cat. And that cat let me know when the Brits were coming! He would have got up onto the windowsill and would have walked up and down, very agitated. When they eventually came in he would run into the hot-press and hide away at the back of it. And a soldier said to me one time, 'Why does your cat run whenever we come in?' I said, 'He doesn't like youse.' He said, 'Well, I knew the dogs didn't like us, but I never knew the cats didn't like us.'

[RW] During visits I used to smuggle wee love letters out – written on tiny bits of cigarette paper. I'll never forget the time he had given me one and I forgot to take it out of my jeans when I returned home. And the next week when I went up they searched me and found it. They took me to a police station in Lisburn. Now, I had never been in a police station in my life; it was the most frightening thing. I was taken there in the back of a police car and somebody had to take the kids home. They questioned me about the letter, claiming he was trying to smuggle information to people outside. The Harry Kirkpatrick supergrass trial was going on at the time, and maybe they thought they'd find something in my letter about it, but there was nothing. After two hours they let me go. It was one of the worst experiences I ever had. I had to make my own way home.

[RM] There was one terrible experience I had. My daughter was coming up the street carrying a wee parcel. And this soldier, who was on foot patrol, ran over and demanded to see what was in it. He was so threatening that my daughter squealed because she thought he was going to shoot her. We opened the parcel – it was a miniskirt. And I said to him: 'Is that what you were going to shoot her for? A wee miniskirt?' 'I'll shoot them,' he said, 'whether they be man, woman or child.' And with that he put his gun to his shoulder, and shot a man who was walking up the street – right through the head! I got a terrible shock! I ran up the stairs to get a blanket to put over the man –he was dead. A jeep came speeding over and took the soldier away. Then the ambulance and police came. I had to go down to Springfield Road barracks and make a statement. I told them the truth – I told them there wasn't another soul in the street. But when it went to court I was never called as a witness, and the soldier's defence was that there was a 'hostile crowd' in the street and he had no option but to shoot. That was a total lie. He was sitting there outside the courtroom when I came out, and I went over to him and I says: 'Well, you got away with it, with that judge. But I'm going to tell you something: see the judge that you have to meet above, you'll not get past him.' I never went for counselling over that. Nor my daughter, she was only fourteen, it was an awful shock to her. No-one ever came to see us about it. Only a priest.

[RW] I remember them shooting CS gas into Leeson Street. I was sitting there with a bucket of water to splash over the kids' faces, to take the sting out of their eyes and mouths. I lived directly opposite a pub in McDonald Street, and I remember one night a Saracen [armoured vehicle] arrived and parked right up against my door. And I watched the soldiers smash their way into the pub and set about robbing it! They were taking out crates of Teacher's Whisky, and other drink –as well as a big bottle full of money donated to charity – and loading them into the back of the Saracen. I remember the officer asking me to sign this form. I'm not sure what it was for. Maybe they were expecting me to confirm that they broke into that pub because they had to –they were probably trying to pretend that there was a sniper inside. I refused to sign anything.

[RW] I marched down to the Lower Falls during the Curfew†, because my mother-in-law lived there, as well as his aunt, his cousins... they all lived in the Lower Falls. People were furious. How dare they call a curfew on those people! Children with no milk, no bread, no nothing; and the women not allowed out to shop or anything. How dare they! That would never have happened in any town in England. There would have been an outcry. But it was alright to do it to us 'Paddies'.

Conflict, peace and sectarianism

What thoughts did the family members have about the conflict they had endured, and for which their loved ones had gone to prison? And did they feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

[LW] When you look at our husbands, they never would have been where they were if it hadn't been for the conflict. For they all come from good homes.

[LW] Yes, they did it because they believed in what they were doing, and we supported them.

[LW] As things escalated one side became as brutal as the other. Now, you didn't ignore the brutality, but it just seemed to be a consequence of what we were all living through. And whether it was your husband or your son who was involved you just supported them, you stood by them. In an ideal world these things wouldn't have happened, but it's not an ideal world and that's just the road we all ended up going down.

[RW] There was quite a lot happened to me in the area I lived in, as regards the Proxies, because I did not see their point of view. My husband and I were not for armed struggle, we did not believe in it. We always thought: Christ Almighty, we've had 800 years of trying with violence and we've failed, so why continue with it, for it's going to be a failure at the end of the day. Why not try something different? Why not get into real politics, fight the system that way? My children know nothing at all about Republicanism, they certainly got nothing from us. And I am happy about that. They've all grown up now; their main priority is looking after their families.

[RW] When my husband was in jail he had plenty of time to reflect, including about the things he done to other people. He has talked about that. Now, he mightn't say to anyone, but I know he regrets it. He enjoyed the meetings which

† On 3 July 1970, when soldiers searched a house in the Lower Falls Road, rioting ensued and hundreds of troops then sealed off the area. The episode became known as the 'Falls Curfew' and the Army maintained the curfew for 34 hours. The Official IRA decided to take on the Army and three civilians died in gun battles. 1,600 canisters of CS gas were fired into the area. The curfew was finally lifted when 1000 women from surrounding areas marched in carrying milk and bread.

led to the previous pamphlet. He said he couldn't believe the things which were coming out. You have to be comfortable, before things will come out. Once somebody opens up, others will follow. Then people can be more honest.

[RM] So many of the murders that happened on both sides should never have happened. I never agreed with all that.

[RW] There's always going to be people –on both sides –who want to go back. And it's probably more the case that they don't want their positions taken away from them, which is robbing and stealing things, which they used to get away with years ago.

[RD] I remember when my dad had just got out of jail he took me to the local shops. We got to the bottom of the Shaw's Road and there were a few soldiers there who stopped him. I remember me being afraid, and my daddy saying: 'Don't do this in front of my daughter.' And them searching him. That was my first experience of the police or soldiers, and it was a very negative one. Before that, my mum had kept us from the political side of things. She never ever said, 'Your daddy's inside because all police are bad men.' But this was my first experience of the security forces.

[RM] Now, I'll tell you the God's honest truth. I would have said to my sons: 'Don't let anyone ever come to my door and tell me youse have shot anybody. I'll have to live with it if somebody comes and tells me youse have been shot, but don't ever youse shot anybody, I don't want that.' I'm very strong in my faith, and I don't believe in killing people, and I don't care who or what they are.

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[LW] I think as they got older, our husbands' generation began to question things: do we really want this for our children? Because they were parents by then, and were saying: do we really want it to go on like this, can we not change it? Do we really need to keep going in and out of jail, do our kids need to do the same?

[LW] If people back then had been the way our husbands are now, things might have turned out different. To have the head on them to say: no, this isn't the road we should go down, we have to get this sorted.

[LM] And at that time most of the lads that were in thought that they were doing something for their country. But I think that when they came out and seen what was happening here, I think they began to think the opposite, I think they thought they had been fighting for nothing really.

[RS] But it's good to see people working together, and talking together. There's no difference between people, certainly not between the people in working-class areas. The difference is between all of us and those who live outside our communities in their big houses, up the Malone Road or Cultra or wherever, who have used us to do their dirty work and manipulated us.

[RW] Looking back at the conflict, I don't feel it was worth it. All those people dead? People getting shot –what for, at the end of the day? Both sides have come through the same trauma. There's good and bad on both sides. Bitter ones as well. I wouldn't want things to go back to how they were. If I was out somewhere and young people were talking about getting involved I would tell them that they're not going to sort out anything through violence... people dying for what? The best thing is for people to sit around a table and sort it out through politics. The next generation might do it. The good thing is that people can be a bit more outspoken than they could have been years ago. It used to be you couldn't say anything: you'd have been tarred and feathered for saying the wrong things. Now there's a bit more free speech.

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[LW] The likes of the DUP and the Paisleyites, I never had any time for them. For they were 'marching them up to the top of the hill and marching them down again' – and then when anything happened they disowned them. But it wasn't *their* sons who were going to prison.

[LM] That's right. That is still there with me. When I see some of those who were doing the shouting and yelling and getting lads all worked up, I really feel mad. Because look where they are now, after all that shouting and yelling and all those lads doing all that time in jail. I'm glad my son's doing a good thing now [cross-community work], and his brother too, and I wouldn't like to see other young ones going in for a long time in jail. I'm sure there were a lot of mothers who felt the same way as myself.

[LW] I think most of our politicians are out of touch with ordinary people. I remember a few years ago we were campaigning for an independent councillor and we were at one of the polling stations. A DUP member arrived up by car to give out her leaflets, and she says to the ones with her: 'Where am I, where is this?' How can she stand there, handing out leaflets asking people to vote for her when she doesn't even know where she is! Just then two minibus-loads of pensioners from the church came along soon after she arrived, and immediately after they left she was away back into her car again. It was just to show them her

face and give them her leaflets – and then away she went. What would she know about life in working-class areas?

[LM] My youngest, my daughter, is now 45; the boys are in their fifties. I would like to see their children getting a good future. But the things that are happening at the minute [dissident Republican attacks], even this arguing between the parties at Stormont, you wonder what is going to happen. The politicians always seem to be on edge as if everything is ready to break down again.

[RD] I think we have to see our politicians as being of *some* value, although a lot of them have their own agenda. For what other way is there to do it? If people vote them in then we must let them get on with it.

[RS] I voted the politicians in and I don't regret it. And I don't care if a certain person is on £50,000 a year, or £60,000 a year, I don't want my child going through what I went through. The happiest news I heard recently was the INLA giving that statement [getting rids of their weapons].

[LW] It is the community workers who have got us to where we are today. It has been a long road, but at least we're moving forward. If our husbands and sons, who fought the Republicans, and went to jail, can sit down and talk with them across the table, why can't the politicians? It wasn't their children, or their husbands, who went to jail – it was ours. Our husbands are prepared to sit across the table from Republicans if it leads to a better life for the next generation. What is the point of power-sharing if the politicians are still refusing to work with one another properly? They're playing wee games with our future and the hopes of the next generations. Nobody wants to go back. If Loyalists and Republicans can sit down why can't they? Okay, it might stick in the throat sometimes, but you don't always have to like somebody to be prepared to work constructively with them, if it's for the better. Why can't the politicians do that? They weren't fighting; they didn't go to jail. Why can't they get on with it?

[RD] I think it's great that my da works with Loyalists. It's the only way to move forward, to get the issues out there and discuss them. And they probably realise they've got more similarities than differences, and being able to look at issues which aren't just politics, but social issues, that everybody is worried about. The first thing you have to do is to build trust and respect one another.

[RW] To me most politics is the same old crap, it just goes round in circles. Kids have to learn how to debate things properly; maybe in community groups they could get them talking together.

[RD] We all have to think things through and talk things through. What I would like to say is that I was very fortunate, but I can imagine it being completely different. I was fortunate that when my dad was inside my mum was willing to wait for him, and that when he did come out it didn't take us long to get used to him, and that he has brought us up fair and has brought us up well. But I could

have ended up with a father like many out there who have been badly affected from being in jail, and could have ended up bitter or maybe not bothered about me going to school. My dad was insistent: you're going to finish school, you're going to get an education. He had those values to give to me, but it could have been completely different. Other young people who read this pamphlet might have come through more difficult experiences, especially if their father came out of prison and couldn't relate to his children. I think my dad realised that having spent all those years in jail because he was out there fighting, he now owed things to his children.

[LW] Sometimes I think many of the younger generation think they have missed out. They imagine the conflict was something exciting. The reality is that they have had a lucky escape, for there is nothing romantic about going to jail, nothing romantic about the conflict. Yes, the prisoners might have had a close camaraderie and had some laughs inside, but most of the time it was tough going and many young men spent most of their youth inside. And that is now lost to them, it will never be regained. Yet the kids of today don't see this side of it; they think it must have been wonderful.

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[LM] That's why I get into trouble sometimes. I took to drink because I thought that drink would help me, but it didn't. And in our local club when I heard some of the young ones talking I lost my temper with them and just let go, and asked them: what would youse do if you ended up in prison for a long, long time? I was telling them the way I feel, and trying to prevent some of them getting involved. But it was like talking to a brick wall. They would have just said to me: how are you getting away with saying all this, without anybody putting you out? In a way I was trying to mother them, because I had effectively lost one of my sons; I was trying to prevent other young ones from getting involved. But at that time the Troubles were still bad and most of them got involved.

[LW] We have been out socially with our husbands and you would often get young lads who come over to us and say: 'Tell us about your time in jail.' And as our husbands would talk to these young lads you could see that they were sitting there mesmerised. Our husbands would be saying: 'I remember the time when we did this... and remember we had a laugh doing that...' Eventually they realised they were making it all sound too romantic, so then they began to say: 'Look, we might have had a laugh there, but this is the reality of it...' And they would then try to describe the bad times.

[LW] Aye, like when somebody threw boiling water over my husband.

[LW] There's nothing romantic about that.

[RM] I would tell young people nowadays to think of what they are putting their mothers and fathers through. We have to suffer for what our young ones are doing. When I think of the nights we sat here in fear... I wouldn't like to go through it all again. All the house-raiding. Some soldiers were okay, some were nasty. When they raided my house one time they deliberately smashed my washing machine. And where are we now because of it all? We're no better off. Look at Stormont. They are a load of cowboys up there. And I'm not only talking about one side, the whole lot of them are. As far as I can see, they're all in it for the money. It's time they closed the place down and threw them all out!

[RW] My husband would never speak about the conflict, or about jail, in the house. I have six sons, and it was never spoken about in the house. He never talked to them about doing time, or told them that they should be joining this or doing that.... There's fathers who tell their sons to do what they did, but he would never do that. And not one of them did get involved. There's no reason now. To me years ago the kids were used, they were manipulated.

[RD] I never had any sectarianism in my house. Anything my dad said was always about the system, never about ordinary Protestants. He said there should be no difference between us all. But a few years ago I wanted to join the police, this was when politics were progressing and Sinn Féin were supporting the idea of Catholics joining the police. But my daddy said: 'Over my dead body!' Although it was something I would have liked to do, to be honest this community where we live is still not ready for someone to take a step like that.

[RW] I hate to sound pessimistic, but I can't see any real progress being made here. There is too much baggage, it will take years for trust to come about. For no matter what people at a community level do, the politicians are going to dictate. And you will always get the diehards, on either side. I can't see a real future for this country. Look at what happened the other day: Jesus Christ, that man, stripped, his hands tied behind his back and then shot in the head! That's taking us back thirty years! And the car bomb in Newry. How can we go forward with people like that around? I think it's the way people are brought up. If these people are being brought up to 'hate this or hate that' by their parents they too will only have hate. And if you are brought up to hate, there will always be losers, there can never be any winners.

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[RD] When I was at school, my own thinking was in line with my daddy's thinking. Often he would have sat and told me about the way the Catholic people were treated years ago. I would have taken all this in and accepted it. But as I got older I began to feel that things were changing. I started to form my own political views and quite often he and I wouldn't see eye to eye. But –and I hate to admit this – after I finished my education and began to work alongside Protestants for the first time, I was surprised to find that some of them were still bitter, and more sectarian than I had expected. For example, I worked in a school in a Protestant area and I don't think the school realised, when they first employed me, where I was from. A couple of months later my job went out to advertisement, but one of the staff reassured me: 'You'll be fine, you're doing a brilliant job.' Now, I had to bring a form of ID with me on the day and the only thing I had was my Irish passport. And I didn't get the job. I recalled my daddy telling me that years ago no Catholic would have got jobs, and I was left asking myself: maybe he's right, maybe it still is like that, maybe many people are still sectarian. Isn't it strange how years ago I would have argued with my dad, telling him to get with the times, that things have changed, and it is only now at the age of 27 that I am starting to question that? You'd think it would be the other way about. My worry is that we have still such a long way to go before we see real change here. But we can only bring about that change by talking to one another –and respecting one another.

A few final thoughts:

[LW] Sometimes the story of the Troubles is a totally male-dominated one. Women played their own role throughout it all, and in many respects had it worse than what the men did, because the women had to cope with everyday life and try to treat everything as normal. Well, it wasn't normal. It's not normal to have to go on a visit to your husband or son in jail. It's not normal to live year after year in the middle of a conflict. And it's a lonely life. There's many a night you're lying in bed and you wonder: is this what's in front of me?

[LW] I think, apart from times when things inside the prison were really bad, that it definitely was harder for the women and the families outside because they had everything to worry about: finances, rearing the kids, trying to keep a roof over their heads.

[LW] From my point of view it's been good to be able to tell a bit of *our* story, because for years the women's side of things has long been forgotten and neglected.

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