



NORTHERN  
IRELAND  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
COMMISSION

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## **COMMISSION CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION TO ADDRESS INQUEST VERDICT**

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission believes that the findings of the inquest into the death of Roseanne Irvine, who died by suicide in Magheraberry Prison in March 2004, confirm the need for urgent action by government to improve the conditions of women in prison

The main finding of the inquest was that the prison system 'failed Roseanne' who had a 'long history of mental health difficulties'. There was a 'severe lack of communication and inadequate recording' of her case, a 'failure to act' on her risk assessment of self harm and suicide and a general 'lack of healthcare and resources for women prisoners'. Lack of awareness of prison staff, the fact that she did not see a doctor and the inadequacy of hospital care were other factors which contributed to her death. The jury stated that she could have been taken to an outside hospital, prison staff should have been fully briefed, and she could have been 'paired' with another prisoner. Finally the jury stated that prison is not suitable for holding women with mental health problems and that prison staff should be trained in suicide awareness.

At the time of Roseanne Irvine's death, Dr Linda Moore, (Human Rights Commission) and Professor Phil Scraton (Queen's University Belfast) were carrying out research for the Commission in Mourne House Women's Unit at Magheraberry Prison. Both gave evidence at the inquest.

Professor Scraton stated:

*"We witnessed a regime in Mourne House Women's Unit that had all but collapsed. The women's healthcare centre had closed, there were limited opportunities for work, education or occupational therapy. Women were regularly locked in their cells for most of the day. Those, like Roseanne, who self harmed or were suicidal, were located in strip cells in the punishment block. Vulnerable women were placed at greater risk and the failures in the regime were systemic from prison officers through to senior management. It was, and still is to some extent, a service in denial."*

Dr Moore added:

*"The research followed concerns from Human Rights Commissioners who visited the Women's Unit in the aftermath of the death of another prisoner, Annie Kelly. We found significant and enduring breaches of international human rights standards. Custom and practice seriously compromised the Prison Service's duty of care, particularly for vulnerable women. Roseanne's death was a tragic consequence of a lack of management that put many women and girls at risk. It amounted to neglect of her right to life in which her treatment was both inhumane and degrading."*

Professor Monica McWilliams, Chief Commissioner of the NIHRC, commented:

*"The Human Rights Commission is currently following the recommendations of our earlier report - The Hurt Inside - which highlighted these concerns. This report recommended the provision of a separate women's facility, which we believe needs to be urgently addressed by the Northern Ireland Office. A therapeutic unit for women suffering from mental ill-health is also required together with a full inquiry into the deaths of three women in prison, including Roseanne Irvine.*

*What the research demonstrates is the importance of investigative powers for the Human Rights Commission to enter and report on places of detention. These powers are currently being debated in Parliament and need to be strengthened. This tragedy demonstrates that prison is not an appropriate place of detention for women with severe mental illness and women*

*being detained in this way is a serious breach of their human rights.”*

### **Further information**

For further information and contact details for the above spokespersons, please contact Peter O’Neill, Head of Information, Education and Development on 028 9024 3987 (office), 07786 338290 (mobile).

### **Notes to editors**

1. The Commission’s new research into the imprisonment of women at Hydebank Wood will be published in spring. Copies of the above mentioned report *The Hurt Inside: The Imprisonment of Women and Girls in Northern Ireland* are available from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission or on its website [www.nihrc.org](http://www.nihrc.org).