

# WOMEN IN CUSTODY

## A system designed for men

The population of women prisoners in England and Wales has features which distinguish it from the men. Women prisoners are few in number; they constitute less than four per cent of the total prison population, or an average of 1,577 in 1992 (Home Office Statistics Bulletin, 1993). Women are more likely to be imprisoned for non-violent crimes and to be given shorter sentences. In 1991 only 17 per cent of women were serving sentences for violent crime, compared with 37 per cent of men; and the majority of women were serving sentences of less than 18 months (NACRO 1993). Women

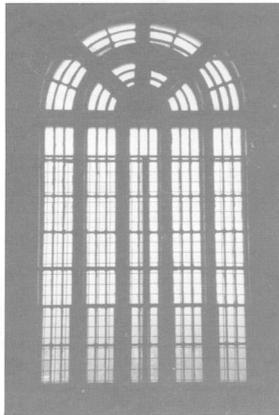
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prisoners, the majority of whom are mothers, are less able than men to trust that their child-care responsibilities will be taken on by their partners. While 91 per cent of fathers in prison leave their children with the mother, only 23 per cent of mothers know that their children are being cared for by the father (NACRO, 1992). Yet, despite these differences, women are imprisoned in a system designed for men.

Since most women are not seen to pose any threat to the community, and this is acknowledged in the short sentences they serve, there is a strong argument for abolishing prison as a punishment for their crime and reserving secure places for the truly dangerous. This argument, most fully articulated in Pat Carlen's "Strategy For Abolition" (Carlen 1990), derives from the premise that imprisoning women does no good for the women, is costly to the State, and causes harm to the children involved. Recent attempts have been made, in some women's prisons, to ameliorate this harm by providing extended, or day-long, visits for children. Such initiatives are, however, limited by the availability of space and staff; not all women can benefit. Furthermore, the media publicity surrounding these visits leaves unaddressed the question of whether these women should be imprisoned.

## Women's experience of prison

The majority of women who are imprisoned have already suffered poverty and deprivation. Many have experienced institutional care. Many are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Imprisoning these women severs the few remaining ties which bind them to society (i.e. family relationships, home, job), and makes them less able to cope on release. In a recent study I interviewed 34 women who had experienced life in, and after, prison (Eaton, 1993). These women all spoke of the degradation of the prison experience and the difficulty of coping after prison. Prison was experienced as the inculcation of dependence and deference - an exaggerated form of gender



Peter Dailymple

socialisation. As one woman said:

"I don't think anything can be done that's going to be constructive until they get rid of the way they treat women and see women. If you're not like their women - Ah then, we've got to make you like our women."

Rules and regulations are enforced in women's prisons with either such rigour, or such caprice, that a greater number of disciplinary offences are recorded for women than for men. However, women's anger is frequently turned inward resulting in a high incidence of mental illness and of self-mutilation. Despite the continuing suicides, mentally ill women are still being sent to prison. Many are housed in Holloway's C1 wing, but clearly prison is no place of safety for the mentally ill.

## Addressing the needs of women prisoners

This is one of the many issues addressed by the charity Women In Prison. Founded in 1983 W.I.P. is committed to the employment of ex-prisoners to work on behalf of women prisoners and to effect real change within the women's prison system. While the daily work of W.I.P. addresses the needs of women currently imprisoned, Chris Tchaikovsky, the Director of W.I.P., is concerned that present policy is neglectful or dismissive of the realities of life for women prisoners. This she attributes to the failure of the criminal justice system to see women as women, different in their criminal activity and different in their social context.

Recently, this issue has emerged in debates about placing women prisoners in units designed for, and adjacent to men. In the context of a falling population of men prisoners these suggestions are frequently presented as a means of making available to women the best of the facilities within the prison system. Such proposals ignore the research which reveals that a high proportion of women prisoners have been victimised and abused by men. Proximity to men, many of whom have records of violence, may be, at best, disturbing, at worst, extremely distressing. Chris Tchaikovsky has documented the disadvantages to women in such situations, ranging from an inadequate share of resources to a fear for personal safety (Tchaikovsky, 1991).

Fitting a small number of women into

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a system designed for men is not the best way to meet the needs of women prisoners. Rather than having to re-contextualise each new initiative proposed, Chris Tchaikovsky would like to see the establishment of a national strategy for the care of women prisoners. To this end she is currently working with others in the criminal justice system. Such a strategy would direct coherent, women-centred policy to address the

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problems posed by, and for, women prisoners. In this way underlying principles could guide nationwide practice, not only to inhibit the harmful but also to promote the good.

## Good practice

At present there are examples of good practice in individual prisons but there is no way to ensure that such practices continue or are adopted more widely. One such example of good practice is the current Personal Empowerment Programme (P.E.P.) in Holloway Prison. P.E.P. is aimed at the growing numbers of imprisoned women whose lives are limited by addiction. Some of these women are serving sentences for drug related crimes, others for property crimes perpetrated to fund a drug habit. Two years ago a study put the figure for addicted prisoners in Holloway at 40 per cent (Matthews, 1991). A worker on P.E.P. puts the current figure at 65-70 per cent on a conservative estimate.

Previous programmes for addicts have been officer-led which raises basic questions about the role of disciplinary agents in a process which should increase the autonomy of prisoners by challenging their dependency. P.E.P. is clearly about personal empowerment. To this end the programme brings into the prison a group of women trained in therapeutic processes. Some of the women are ex-addicts, one is also an ex-prisoner. Through a range of structured activities prisoners are encouraged to address their own situations, the origins of their addictions and their routes to change and choice. The programme was developed by Jennifer McCabe who has pioneered a number of resources for women prisoners. For Jennifer McCabe the independence of this programme is vital. P.E.P. is a voluntary organisation, funded by independent trusts and managed in the community. The current funding is for a two year pilot of the programme in Holloway, and for an evaluation of the work by a university psychology department. Within two years P.E.P. hopes to demonstrate the effectiveness of this work and ask that the Home Office then fund it as it funds other provisions, such as education, within the prisons. The independence of this programme from

the disciplinary regime is vital to its success and so too is the quality of staff working the programme. Currently such initiatives are dependent on the vision and good will of individual governors and staff. By recognition at a level beyond that of the individual prison, P.E.P. could be effectively introduced into other prisons.

P.E.P. is one example of apparent good practice that could be put to good effect in other prisons. However, the benefits of this and other initiatives will be lost unless there is a recognised strategy which deals with women prisoners as a distinct group with their own characteristics and their own needs. Few need to be in prison at all but while they are there the regime should be capable of guaranteeing that their needs as women are met in a way which does as little damage as possible to the development of an autonomous self.

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## Women's Prisons in England

- 1 Askham Grange
- 2 Bullwood Hall
- 3 Cookham Wood
- 4 Cornton Vale
- 5 Drake Hall
- 6 Durham (H - Wing)
- 7 East Sutton Park
- 8 Holloway
- 9 Low Newton
- 10 New Hall
- 11 Puckdechurch
- 12 Risley
- 13 Styal

