

'NOT REAL CRIMINALS'

Police perceptions of women offenders

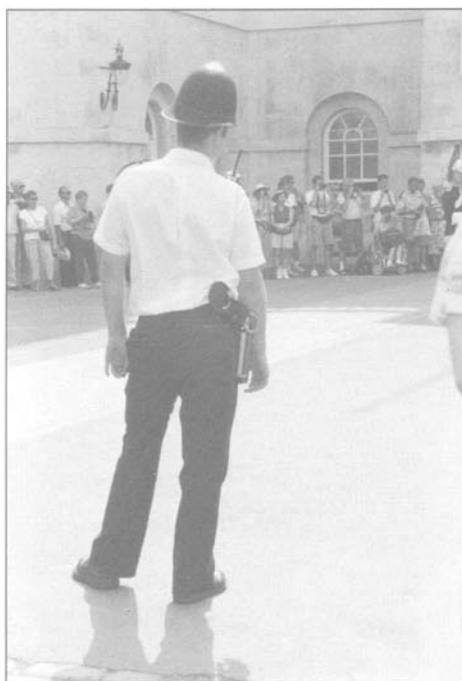
Many researchers have written of a general professional police 'culture' which influences the way officers go about their work and relate to those with whom they come into contact. A central feature of this culture is a 'cult of masculinity' which, together with "social pressure, deference to rank, and an internal quasi-military code of honour" (Tuohy et al, 1993: 169), characterises the British police force. The masculine culture is evidenced by the "emphasis on remaining dominant in any encounter and not losing face, the emphasis placed on masculine solidarity and on backing up other men in the group especially when they are in the wrong, the stress on drinking as a test of manliness and a basis for good fellowship, the importance given to physical courage and the glamour attached to violence" (Smith and Gray, 1985:372). Smith and Gray describe the importance of sex, and talking about sex, in this culture: "There was a great deal of conversation about sex, in very gross language, in which the men were always conquerors and the women 'slags' and 'whores'" (Smith and Gray, 1985:369).

This masculine culture works to exclude women, and invalidate the presence of women. Dunhill (1989) has written that "Women are certainly one of the principle 'out-groups' to the police 'in-group'. Womanhood is one of the things that the male group is defined against, to maintain an ideology of toughness, bravery and authority" (Dunhill, 1989:207). Police forces are numerically dominated by men (male officers outnumber female by about 9:1 in the UK), and deal, primarily, with men as suspects and offenders. The emphasis on masculinity within police forces leads one to consider the ways in which the women who do enter the police sphere are dealt with.

'Clean' and 'dirty'

Jennifer Hunt (1984) has argued that police officers have created oppositional categories of moral and non-moral, and 'clean' and 'dirty'. Male police officers see themselves as belonging to the 'dirty' domain, the "vice-ridden public sphere" (p 288), where non-morality is a necessity. Women are seen to be moral, and to belong to the 'clean' domestic domain. Moral women (wives, mothers, daughters) "are trusting and emotional (irrational) persons whose actions are embedded in love and kindness". Women's moral superiority is thought to stem from her isolation from the public, 'dirty', sphere. Those women who enter the public sphere, such as police women and women who are seen to be involved in a criminal lifestyle, cannot be moral women. Hunt argues that women in the policeman's world are masculinised; they are 'dykes' or 'whores'. The 'dyke' "is perceived as overtly man-like. She walks, talks and acts in an aggressive and tough manner". The 'whore' is "covertly mas-

culine. Like a man she sells herself for profit on the marketplace in order to support her family", and, in contrast to 'moral women', her "success is measured by the number of sexual conquests as well as the amount of money she earns".



Kirsty Cunningham

'Good' and 'bad' women

Relatively little work has focused specifically on beliefs held by the police about the women they arrest. However, a number of studies of the attitudes of other members of the criminal justice system have been published. Several writers (eg Worrall, 1981) have proposed that actors in the criminal justice system, such as magistrates, judges and probation officers, categorise female offenders as 'good' women or 'bad' women. It is likely that police officers would also employ this 'good/bad' dichotomy, since police officers routinely use stereotypes and dichotomies to make sense of the world

they police (eg. Young, 1991). Indeed, my own research suggests that they do employ a dichotomy. This is most obvious in beliefs about violent women: although most women are thought to be 'good' (i.e. non-violent), women who are physically violent are thought to be 'bad', and 'worse' than men who become violent. There was a widespread belief that women offenders are manipulative, officers depicted women offenders as using their 'femininity' to manipulate men, including policemen. The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' women can be seen again here, since 'decent' women who cry, or bring their children to the police station with them, are perceived as 'genuine', and deserving of sympathy. Those who are labelled 'rough', however, and who cry, or bring children to the police station, are perceived as 'manipulative'.

However, my research also suggests that police officers are particularly reluctant (compared to non-police officers) to allow women to move out of the traditional 'feminine' role. Researchers such as Jones (1986) have written that police men find the idea of women doing 'men's work' (police work) threatening to their own sense of masculinity, and so use various means to render policewoman harmless. The findings of my studies suggest that a similar process occurs when police men meet women offenders, and officers deal with this by rendering women offenders harmless, in that they continue to see them as safe, unthreatening and trustworthy. In Hunt's (1984) terms, police officers appear to be reluctant to let women who offend enter the public sphere, and so interpret their behaviour in ways which confine them to the 'clean' domestic world.

'Not real criminals'

Police officers do not appear to see women who offend as 'natural' criminals, in the way they do men, but as being basically 'good' women, who have offended due to circumstances. Women are thought to be risk-avoiders, and their offending behaviour is not believed to be motivated by the desire for excitement, or attempts to impress peers, as male offenders' may be. The primary reason for offending, for both men and women, is believed to be financial gain, but women are, to some extent, believed to be motivated less by greed than by economic need, and a desire to provide for themselves and their

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families.

Women offenders are viewed as trustworthy, relative to male offenders, and expectations of women offenders are higher. More lenient treatment is advocated for women who offend than for men; it is felt that women can be more successfully rehabilitated than men, so parole is more appropriate, and strict, harsh treatment unnecessary. I would suggest that this is because women are not seen as 'natural criminals' and will, therefore, be more readily persuaded away from crime than men.

One of the principal methods by which women have been rendered harmless by the criminal justice system has been through the medicalisation or pathologising of women who offend (Heidensohn, 1985; Wilczynski, 1991a, 1991b). This does not seem to be an issue for police officers, who did not see mental or physical conditions as relevant to offending behaviour.

These findings suggest an unwillingness to see women as 'criminals' in the way that men are seen to be, and a desire to see them as 'good' women who have committed offences as a result of external factors. This is very similar to the central tenets of the biological determinist model, which proposes that women are naturally law abiding, and, although women may commit offences, they are not 'true criminals' (Lombroso and Ferrero, 1895, in Heidensohn, 1985). I am not suggesting that police officers regard women offenders as typical women, who are victims of circumstance; my data shows clearly that women who offend are perceived more negatively than women who do not offend. What does seem to be clear, though,

is that women offenders are regarded as less 'naturally criminal', and more similar to non-offenders, than are men who offend.

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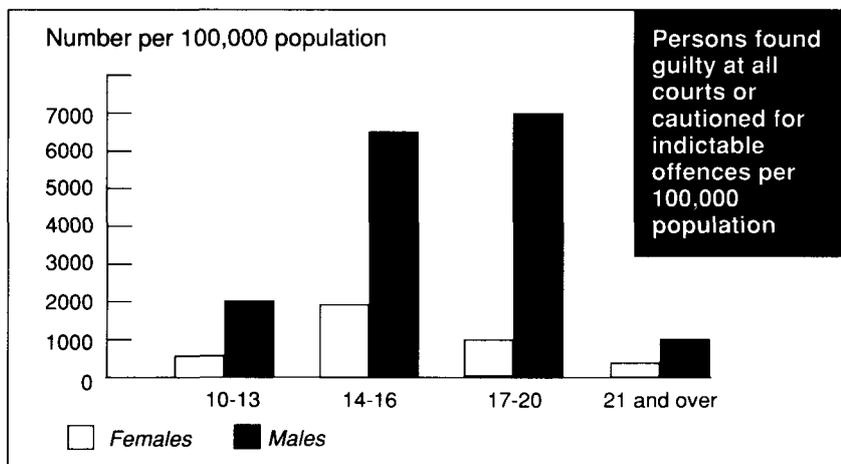
Some thoughts on 'mixed' prisons

The imbalance in the numbers of men and women appearing before the courts presents grave difficulties for the administration of criminal justice. Pressure from male offending drives the planning of resources and often leads to the particular needs of female offenders being glossed over. This has been evident in recent reports such as the Woolf Report and in Government papers such as Custody, Care and Justice.

In 1992, women comprised only 4% of the total prison population, held in 12 prisons and remand centres. When factors such as level of security required and their status as convicted or remand prisoners are accounted for, the net result is that, in many cases, women are placed in prison establishments at long distances from their homes. This has an obvious impact on the maintenance of family ties.

One solution to this dilemma has been to advocate the development of 'mixed' prisons. This term is vague and somewhat ambiguous, incorporating a number of possibilities. A distinction needs to be drawn between 'mixed' prisons referring to shared sites where women are accommodated in totally separate units which are separately staffed and self-contained and those which propose that women should be housed in separate wings but share activities with male prisoners. The latter is the most radical proposal. Indeed, there are already examples of the shared site approach at Risley and Durham.

The issues raised by this proposal are numerous. Of paramount importance is the issue of safety. Given that a high percentage of women in prison have already experienced and survived physical, sexual and emotional violence, we need to consider whether a 'mixed' prison would accord them the protection and privacy they deserve. Even within the present system, the safety of women cannot be guaranteed. An unannounced short inspection of Drake Hall open prison for women in November 1994 recommended the construction of an anti-intruder fence in response to the concerns expressed by staff over intruders and echoed by inmates. The action taken here implies that if the safety of women is to be striven for, the consequences for women may include experiencing tighter security controls than their male counterparts to keep intruders out, not them in.



Criminal statistics, England and Wales, 1990

Source: Gender & the Criminal Justice System Home Office, 1992

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This raises a more general question about the provision of equal opportunities. Given that the average female prison population in England and Wales in 1992 was 1,536, and that if women are to be held near their homes and families they have to be divided between a larger number of prisons than at present, the outcome will be that women will be very much in the minority in each establishment. In these circumstances, how can equal opportunities be guaranteed? Will women suffer if few resources are available? Will opportunities in prison employment, education and leisure be allocated on the basis of gendered stereotypes? Equal opportunities policies can be implemented but what will it all mean in practice? If we are to create the 'woman-wise' penology which Pat Carlen (1990) argues for, we need to ensure that changes within the penal system do not increase the oppression of women further.

Misogynistic and misguided?

Outlining the case against 'mixed' prisons should not imply all is well within the present system. I would not wish to argue that a single-sex environment is a natural setting and agree with Feilim O'h Adhmail (1994), an inmate in Durham, that relationships between the sexes can become distorted. Within men's prisons, macho tendencies are reinforced and reproduced and sexism can be extreme. Yet, this cannot be overcome simply by accommodating a very small number of women in a male establishment. Drawing on the experiences of one female inmate who had lived in women's prisons in England and a 'mixed' prison in the United States, the environment was far from natural. Men and women were encouraged to mix together and yet expressions of natural human behaviour such as the forming of relationships were strictly forbidden and continuously policed (Prison Service Journal 1988).

However, the issue is fundamentally one of choice and involves asking the women themselves about their preferences and concerns. This suggestion is likely to find little support within a criminal justice system which routinely strips individuals of many basic civil rights. Giving women a choice means ensuring that women who prefer to be accommodated in women only prisons get the same access to resources. However, the choice can never be a free one. Given the high priority female offenders attach to pre-



Peter Dalrymple

serving ties with their children, they may be prepared to tolerate conditions they feel uncomfortable in to ensure regular contact with their families. Audrey Peckham (1985) describes how she was willing to endure the restrictiveness of Styal, a closed prison, in order to be near her daughter studying in Manchester at the time.

The policy of 'mixed' prisons, described as misogynistic and misguided by Chris Tchaikovsky (1994), the director of Women in Prison, seems to be yet another clear example of the failure to consider the implications of possible changes in penal policy on women.

To add substance to the debate, research is needed. A bizarre idea perhaps given that we have no 'mixed' prisons to evaluate. True. What we do have are examples of 'mixing' within our present provision for female offenders in the prison system and the community - male and female prisons on the same shared site; emergency units for women in Birmingham and Exeter Prisons; bail and probation hostels for female offenders and joint probation groups; mixed special hospitals. We can also draw upon experiences of those who have lived and worked in 'mixed' prisons in other countries such as the United States. Only then can the recommendation be fully examined.

Crucially though we need to think about why it should be thought necessary

to introduce a policy of mixing, rather than looking at the alternatives to helping female offenders to preserve ties with their families and to have greater access to facilities. The most radical of these is decarceration for the majority of female offenders, advocated by Pat Carlen (1990). Other options include improving arrangements for visits, extending home leave, allowing greater access to facilities in the community and seeking alternatives to custodial remands and sentences. It may be of course that the suggestion has little to do with catering for the needs of female offenders, but rather is motivated by a concern with the management of scarce resources and a desire to solve problems within the prison system.

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