

- Masters Thesis, Carleton University School of Social Work, Canada.
- Ross, R. and Fabiano, E. (1985) *Correctional Afterthoughts: Programs for Female Offenders*. Ottawa: Solicitor General of Canada.
- Scott, S. and Payne, T. (1984) "Underneath We're All Lovable" *Trouble and Strife* 3 Summer:21-24
- Shaw, M. (1993) "Reforming Federal Women's Imprisonment" in *In Conflict With the Law. Women and the Canadian Justice System*. E. Adelberg and C. Currie ed. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers: 50-75.
- Shaw, M. (1992) "Issues of Power and Control: Women in Prison and Their Defenders" *British Journal of Criminology* 32 (3):438-452.
- Shaw, M. et al. (1991) *Paying the Price. Federally Sentenced Women in Context*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Shaw, M. et al. (1990) *Survey of Federally Sentenced Women: Report to the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Shaw, M. (1989) *The Federal Female Offender - Report on a Preliminary Study*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Sim, J. (1990) *Medical Power in Prisons*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Sugar, F. and Fox, L. (1990) *Survey of Federally Sentenced Aboriginal Women in the Community*. Ottawa: Native Women's Association of Canada.
- Ussher, J. (1991) *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness*. London: Harvester.
- Vachon, M. (1993) "It's About Time: The Legal Context of Policy Changes for Female Offenders" *Forum on Corrections Research* 6 (1): 3-6
- Velimesis, M. "Sex Roles and Mental Health" *Professional Psychology* 12 (1):128-135.

# MIXED PRISONS

## MISOGYNISTIC & MISGUIDED

On 23 April 1990 a group of women prisoners was transferred from Pucklechurch to Holloway because their safety could not be guaranteed. Pucklechurch was in the grip of a particularly violent riot. Justice Woolf and Judge Tumim were advised by Women in Prison of the consequences for the women involved. Initially the group was fearful both of going to London and to Holloway. They were upset at the sudden separation from their friends and families, worried about contact with legal advisers and justifiably concerned about not being produced at court (the women's court appearances were in fact delayed).

In time, most of the women preferred Holloway to Pucklechurch and, notwithstanding problems with families, friends, legal advisers and court appearances, they wanted to stay there.

Their preference would come as no surprise to anyone who has lived in both a women's unit attached to a men's prison and in an urban women's prison. What is surprising, in the light of the Pucklechurch debacle, (and Pucklechurch was the only riot prison which held women prisoners), is the recommendation by Tumim and Woolf that women could be held in small units annexed to local men's prisons (or, in yet another

*Chris Tchaikovsky is one of the founder members of Women in Prison, an ex-prisoner organisation campaigning on the issue of women's imprisonment.*

snappy oxymoron, 'community prisons'). Such recommendations arise from a wish to place women prisoners near to their homes.

### **MISGUIDED**

It is unfortunate that the debate around mixed prisons has resurfaced, and, worse, appears to be gathering pace. I was hopeful that the more informed sections of the prison reform lobby would avoid building on what was an absurdly misogynistic and misguided proposal. There is proper concern that women prisoners should be held close to their homes, and as there are so many more men than women in prison, this presents the obvious problem of geographical placement.

However, the mixed prisons proposal not only sidesteps what is the central issue, it turns it on its head. We are all aware that the vast majority of women in prison are there for non-endangering, minor offences: there is no need for them to be imprisoned at all. But as they are, rather than creating spaces for them inside men's prisons so that they can be near their homes, and thereby making their circumstances fit the problem, we should turn the problem around and give them the space to visit their friends and families. The right approach to the perennial problem of imprisonment damaging relationships, exacerbated for women because they are imprisoned long distances from their home, is quite simply: let the women go home every weekend. Not only would this ensure that women are not doubly penalised for their small number, it would go some way towards ameliorating the damage enforced separation does to all relationships. Underpinning this concern is my belief that any reform not based on strict policies of decarceration is suspect.

There are many things wrong with the creation of women's units in men's prisons. Not the least of which is the inevitable extension of the carceral zone for women and the principle that operates on 'the more you have the more you fill' basis. It is likely that magistrates and judges, if there are local spaces for them to do so, will imprison all the more women all the more easily. In her 'Strategy for Abolition' (Prison Report No.6) Pat Carlen argues that the way to combat the burgeoning tendency to imprison is to abolish all but a hundred prison places for women - a view I wholeheartedly endorse.

It is maintained that if women are housed in larger, men's prisons, they would benefit from an improved regime due to extra resourcing based on economies of scale. I understand, however, that units for women annexed to men's prisons would in fact be more expensive to resource than the present women's estate. If this is the case 'economies of scale' arguments are redundant. On the other hand, this argument might well gather pace, so it is important to note that resources do not a prison make.

One of the interesting things to emerge from the *Woolf Report* was that the majority of all prisoners complained about staff attitudes and not, as might be expected, about physical conditions. This is indeed surprising when current public discussion is almost exclusively couched in terms of the problems of overcrowding and poor sanitation. Further, prisoners might have been reluctant to complain about staff attitudes in letters, albeit sealed, which were handed to and posted for them by the staff.

### **FACILITIES**

'Community' prisons do offer a means of reducing costs if they allow prisoners to spend more time out of the prison in community based projects. Resources would then be concentrated in the community rather than in the prison. However, even if there is an increase in spending on prison resources, and accepting for the moment that larger gymnasia, swimming pools and teaching materials will improve regimes, I am sceptical as to how accessible these would be for women.

I do not believe that regime monitoring, ring fencing nor equal opportunity policies will make a scrap of difference to the women held in mixed prisons. There is little doubt that if at any time resources were limited, women's access to facilities would be the first to suffer.

Experience has shown this to be the case and with far more sinister implications for women than being last in the queue for the gym, cold food or a hands-on session in computer skills.

It emerged at the inquest on one of the nastiest deaths of a woman in custody, that the resuscitation equipment took almost a quarter of an hour to be brought to the women's wing from the men's hospital. At Durham H Wing, it was not a question of

cold, but contaminated food. The contempt from a number of male prisoners for their female counterparts was revealed by the spitting on, and urinating in, the women's food and drink. So, it really isn't a question of sharing resources or of women not getting their fair share - more a total lack of understanding of the base reality of day-to-day prison life.

Further, the question of cheaper prisons should be no concern of the prison reform lobby. We are not financial management consultants for the Home Office. Campaigners only need to be aware of the adverse effects budgetary constraints have on the lives of prisoners in, for example, the merging of shared resources.

### **ABUSE**

Debates about mixed prisons must also be sensitive to the personal history of many women prisoners. A reception survey conducted by Ingrid Posen in 1988 demonstrated that a high proportion of Holloway prisoners had suffered sexual abuse, violence and rape. The suggestion that women be held in cluster units alongside men, some of whom will almost certainly have been convicted of these offences, is scandalously insensitive to the experiences of these women.

Presumably Woolf and Tumim address this concern when they recommend that women should be held "in a wholly secure and separate block" But, in the light of the hasty transfer of the women out of Pucklechurch during the riot, and the disorientating effect the panoply of techno-security has on the women of Durham H Wing, this recommendation is, to say the least, short-sighted. Even with the presence of oppressive security systems, I do not believe that women's safety in a men's prison could ever be guaranteed. If nothing else, Woolf revealed how ad hoc and chaotic security measures in prison are, and how dangerously incompetent the people operating them - from the officer on the landing to the Minister and his Prison Service staff.

Yet another proposal recently floated by NACRO is the creation of community custodial houses for women. These houses would each hold around 40 women, and would have an increased level of security or supervision at some locations for an exceptional sub-group of women prisoners.

"Space-permitting', young children can come too. As much as I would like to see all women's prisons razed to the ground, I have no doubt that this radical vision of the Dickensian workhouse for women would at a stroke increase the incarcerated female population and the incarcerated child population.

This recommendation could lead to the greatest extension of the state financed carceral zone yet. Magistrates and judges now imprison women with fewer convictions than men. Who can doubt that they would use the supposed 'soft custody' option all the more readily and incarcerate more women and their children?

One wonders who would run these prison houses. Would prison officers be seconded to duties in the community? Or would the social or probation services be recruited to do the job? As the latter have for years had difficulty reconciling their presence in prisons with their duty to advise, assist and befriend, it seems unlikely. Would the whole venture be privatized or are voluntary sector agencies willing to be recruited?

### **CHILDREN**

This is not the first time this year that I have heard well intentioned members of the prison reform lobby motivated by the desire to strengthen ties between imprisoned women and their families, tinkering with the idea that one answer lies in the increased incarceration of women prisoners' children. Here the intention to do good meshes with idealised notions of appropriate womanhood. The problem with this kind of romantic benevolence is that through the twin processes of infantilisation and domestication, it further disempowers the women and children for whom it knows best.

The most debilitating effects of imprisonment are the long-term effects of separating people from the outside world - from everything and in most cases from everyone they know. Making fortnightly or monthly visits easier for the friends and families of those prisoners who have them, goes some way towards acknowledging this. But creating giant urban closed prisons containing every category of prisoners, including women, on no other basis than its locality, could be disastrous not only for the women held there, but for everyone.

Clustering groups of people into small

units around a central core can create a vicious rather than a healthy competitiveness. Prison staff and local community groups may well treat the criminalised who come from the same community, and who they may know, better. Arguably they might, for certain crimes, or because they know the victims, treat them a good deal worse.

The way to combat the effects of imprisonment is to reduce imprisonment. The main aim of any prison reform group must be that fewer women and men go to prison. To go some way towards achieving this we should all keep pressing for shorter sentences and for their impact to be lessened by the breaking up of the sentence. Must we accept uncritically that a custodial sentence be continuous? Flexible sentencing and freer movement for prisoners from inside to outside the prison would be much better and have the effect of bringing more of the 'outside' to inside the prison. This would open up prisons, make them more accountable, render them less artificial, less secretive and most importantly, less debilitating to prisoners and damaging to the people who care for and are separated from them.

Instead of a six month sentence, a defendant would be given a sentence of 180 days. This sentence could, and there must be a voluntary component, be taken on a continuous or on a spread basis, say

Monday to Friday. Rather than the day sentence applying exclusively to women, to pilot the scheme it could, non-controversially, apply to all those defendants convicted of non-violent offences who have been on bail and who are primary child carers.

### **SENTENCING**

The Woolf Report gives us the opportunity to rethink our response to prisoners and imprisonment. Once again, there is a call for an improvement to regimes and conditions. However, now is the time to broaden our view and consider how sentencing practices may reduce the number of people in prison, and ameliorate the damage done to them and those who love them. Decisions concerning disposals may be the jealously guarded prerogative of the magistracy and judiciary, but surely the time has come to call for such disposals to be undertaken in as humane a way as possible. Non-violent people should not be in prison, but if they continue to receive prison sentences the impact on families and community ties would be lessened by weekend leave and by an imaginative use of flexible sentencing. Both women and men could benefit from the advantages of such a scheme, without the disadvantages of ring fenced resources, shared sites, or mixed prisons ■

## **VERBALS**

"About a third of all violent incidents against AfroCaribbeans and Asians were felt to be racially motivated. More than half the street assaults were said to be. Asians also said race was involved in two-thirds of incidents around the home, usually citing white offenders.

[British Crime Survey published in Criminal Justice Digest No 75 HMSO]

"Over 89000 offences against prison discipline were punished in 1992, 4.2% more than in 1991. Two offences were punished per head of the male population and 3.1 offences were punished per head of the female population."

[Statistics of Offences HMSO]

"Of an estimated 2.64 million violent incidents, 20% were domestic assaults involving partners, ex-partners and other relatives and household members. Nearly half of the assaults mentioned by women in the survey were domestic assaults.

[British Crime Survey published in Criminal Justice Digest No 75 HMSO]