

WOMEN PRISONERS

IN SWEDEN

Foreword

In 1991 the government directed the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration to undertake research into the needs of women prisoners and how these needs are met during the serving of a prison sentence. The present study was performed to find out if women who wish to do so can serve their sentences separated from men prisoners, their need for support and help for drug misuse and if their occupational activities with reference to work, study and leisure can be met in prisons with both men and women inmates. Since very little knowledge of women prisoners is available in the literature in Sweden this report makes a very good contribution to this field.

Background

The background to the research described in this shortened English version of the Swedish report is as follows.

In Sweden, as in most European countries, women prisoners are only a small proportion of the annual number of sentenced prisoners received into prisons. However, this proportion has increased from just over 1.5 per cent in 1970 to nearly 5 per cent during 1990s¹. Until 1974 there was only one prison for women in Sweden - the Hinseberg prison. In that year a complete reorganisation of the prison system took place with, inter alia, the aim of placing the large number of prisoners with relatively short prison sentences in prisons which would be situated near their homes. Since this was not feasible to build neighbourhood

prisons which would take a handful of women prisoners it was decided to design these prisons for prisoners of both sexes. Women prisoners were given a separated wing of their own in the neighbourhood prisons but they shared the day's activities with men prisoners.

It was found in 1987 that a number of women prisoners from the Stockholm area who were eligible for neighbourhood prisons were in fact serving their sentences at Hinseberg. To meet the need for more places, a neighbourhood prison for women only - Färingsö - was opened in 1989 in Stockholm. The total number of available women's places was 209 in March 1991. Of this number, Hinseberg provided 94 places, Färingsö 31 whilst the remaining 84 places were divided between 18 different neighbourhood prisons for both men and women.

Against this background the government noted in 1991 that:

Parliament has expressed its concern on a number of occasions about women prisoners in neighbourhood prisons since it is important on the one hand that women prisoners who wish to do so can serve their sentences separated from men prisoners, and on the other that the needs of women prisoners can also be met in prisons with both men and women inmates.

In consequence the government directed the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration to undertake research into the needs of women prisoners and how these are met during the serving of a prison sentence. The study which was carried out sought therefore to obtain knowledge about:

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Norman Bishop, former head of the Research Group at The Swedish Prison and Probation Administration has shortened and translated the English version of the original Swedish report. We extend our gratitude for his work.

1. See Appendix for details.

- a. women prisoners' attitudes to serving their prison sentences separated from men prisoners;
- b. women prisoners' need for support and help for drug misuse;
- c. women prisoners' occupational activities in the prisons with reference to work, study and leisure pursuits;
- d. women prisoners' attitudes to having children in prison with them, and
- e. the implications of the foregoing for the number of places required for women prisoners in the immediate future.

Method

A questionnaire consisting of 49 questions was distributed to all women prisoners who could understand or speak Swedish and were present in the prisons on 6 February 1992 (N=138). The questionnaire also gave opportunity for the free expression of further views - an opportunity which was taken by nearly one-third of the respondents. Replies were received from 119 women, a response rate of 86 per cent.

In the analyses of the replies it was found useful to divide the respondents up according to the type of prison in which they were serving their sentences. Four categories of prison are distinguished: (i) open neighbourhood prisons; (ii) closed neighbourhood prisons (both mixed sex prisons); (iii) Hinseberg national prison and (iv) Färingsö neighbourhood prison (both prisons for women only)².

The Chi-square and Fisher's Exact Probability tests were used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between the categories of prisons. Significant differences at the 95 per cent confidence interval are indicated in what follows with an asterisk (*).

Findings

Age distribution

The table on this page shows the age distribution by type of prison. The women at Färingsö and in the closed neighbourhood prisons were significantly younger (≤ 35) than those in the open neighbourhood prisons*.

Accommodation before reception into prison

Seventy-five per cent of the women lived in stable accommodation whilst 20 per cent lived under casual circumstances. Most (60 per cent) lived with a partner or with children or with both. Others (30 per cent) lived alone or with relatives or companions (8 per cent). More women with stable accommodation were inmates of open neighbourhood prisons than was the case at Färingsö*.

Current offence

Property and drug offences were the most frequent kind of crime (32 and 31 per cent and respectively). Thirteen per cent had committed offences against the person and of this group one-third were guilty of murder, attempted murder or manslaughter. Thirteen per cent were guilty of road traffic offences. Nearly one-third had sentences of over two years whilst 40 per cent were serving sentences of six months or less.

Cigarettes, alcohol and narcotic drugs

Of the 119 women, 102 smoked. Sixty-three per cent stated that they did not use alcohol when free or did so occasionally. Six women drank every day before entry in prison whilst the others did so once or twice a week or month. Twelve women considered they had an alcohol problem and nine of this group were also drug misusers. So far as drugs were concerned nearly 60 per cent ingested drugs daily or as good as daily in the period prior to entry into prison. The inmates of the open neighbourhood prisons used drugs to a significantly lesser extent than those in closed neighbourhood prisons, Färingsö or Hinseberg*. Fifty-eight (60 per cent) of the 119 women considered that they had a drug problem. The most frequently used drugs were amphetamines, either alone or in combination with marihuana or medicinal pills.

Age	All women	Open nghbhd	Closed nghbhd	Färingsö	Hinseberg
Mean	35.0	38.5	30.5	31.0	37.4
Median	34.0	41.0	28.0	32.5	35.0
Lowest	18	19	21	21	18
Highest	59	54	49	44	59

2. Prisoners serving sentences up to one year are normally allocated to neighbourhood prisons whilst those serving longer sentences are allocated to national prisons.

Help for drug misuse

Thirty-five women wanted help for their drug dependence - 23 with narcotic drugs, six with alcohol and three with both alcohol and drugs. In addition, three women who admitted to using narcotic drugs daily but not to having a drug problem, said they would like help. Of the 35 women, 14 (40 per cent) considered that the prison could give them help. 10 of the 14 were inmates at Färingsö.

A further 30 women thought that prison was able to offer help for alcohol or drug misuse but only 10 of this group admitted to the use of narcotic drugs.

There were more women at the open neighbourhood prison and Färingsö who considered that the prison could give them the help than was the case at the closed neighbourhood prisons and Hinseberg*.

Occupational activities in prison

Work

Most of the women worked (43 per cent) or combined work with study (39 per cent). More were working in the open neighbourhood prisons than was the case at the closed neighbourhood prison and Hinseberg* where work combined with study were more frequent. The work carried out in the various prisons included laundry work, the weaving and trimming of mats, kitchen work, cleaning, gardening and various forms of maintenance. More women worked on laundering and work with mats at Hinseberg, in the kitchen at Färingsö on gardening work at the open neighbourhood prisons and on gardening and assembly work at the closed neighbourhood prisons.

Rather less than half (45 per cent) thought that the work provided was good, 18 per cent considered that it was not useful whilst 35 per cent thought that it was neither. More than half of all respondents (58 per cent) wished to see other forms of work provided. This was especially true of the women at Hinseberg*.

Those who stated what they would prefer to have as work (57 per cent), asked for a more vocationally and labour market oriented type of work or a more creative, stimulating, demanding or active work or, at least, a wider range of jobs. More womanly work was also requested such as sewing, nursing, handicrafts, work with furnishing fabrics or with livestock, as well as light engineering and assembly of electronic apparatus.

Studies

Nearly two-thirds had elementary school education, just over one-quarter had completed secondary school studies whilst seven per cent had undertaken further education. Eighteen per cent (22/119) reported that they had difficulties with reading and writing. Nine of these women were studying Swedish.

Just over 41 per cent of the women prisoners were pursuing studies whilst in prison. Two-thirds of this group were reading Swedish, English and Mathematics either alone or in combination or in combination with computer use or typewriting and accounting. The majority (80 per cent) assessed their studies as being useful and good/very good. The prisoners at Hinseberg were especially satisfied in comparison with those who were studying at Färingsö or the neighbourhood prisons*. A few respondents justified their positive views by saying that they considered the presentation of the subjects to be good, the teachers competent and the studies of value for personal development. Forty-three per cent desired a more vocationally and practically oriented education or wanted better opportunities for advanced study, a wider choice of subjects or any courses which could be completed during the stay in prison.

Fourteen women stated that over and above their work or study they took part in other activities. These included group discussions, programmes on freedom from drugs or both as well as pottery, weaving and painting.

Leisure

A variety of ball games, physical training, embroidering and knitting, letter-writing and reading were the kinds of leisure activities that were most often mentioned. More prisoners thought that the opportunities for leisure pursuits were poor than thought that they were sufficient (39 and 28 per cent respectively). By comparison with the open prisons, those at closed prisons and Färingsö held that leisure opportunities were too limited*. The women who held more positive opinions were especially satisfied with the opportunities for exercise in the prison gymnasium. But there was complaint that the gymnasium was too often not available on the weekends because of staff shortages. Those expressing more negative opinions thought that not enough activities were offered for those uninterested in

exercise, that the choice of books was too limited and that staff showed insufficient initiative. Swimming, walking and riding were mentioned as desired activities together with theatre groups, weaving courses, batik, sewing and learning social skills.

Assessment of the prison experience

Single or shared cells?

Of the 119 respondents, 96 (81 per cent) preferred single cell accommodation. They considered that a degree of separation from others was necessary for peace and quiet especially since they lived in close contact with others during the day. A few women said that they mistrusted their fellow-prisoners and preferred single cells for that reason. A smaller number (18/119) preferred to share a cell. They said that they liked having someone to talk to, that sharing mitigated loneliness and that it could give support.

Harassment, threats and violence

Approximately one-fifth of the women (23/11) said that they had been the object of harassment, threats of violence or actual violence. The actual violence was reported by five of this group - three from Hinseberg and one each from a closed and open neighbourhood prison. More women had been the object of harassment and threats at Hinseberg as compared with the open neighbourhood prisons*. No prisoner complained of having been subject to any form of sexual violence or threat.

Hard versus a mild prison climate

In the questionnaire the women were asked to rate the social climate of their prison on seven point-scale. Not unexpectedly, the open neighbourhood prisons were considered to have a milder climate than Hinseberg or Färingsö. This was also true, for the comparison between the closed neighbourhood prisons and Hinseberg. At Hinseberg no difference was found between those with and without previous experience - neither group considered the social climate to be mild.

Positive views of imprisonment

Twelve per cent of the women did not reply to this question and six per cent held that there was nothing positive about the prison in which they were serving their sentence. The remainder thought that the following elements were of positive

character: studies, food, sitting and the surrounding nature (25 per cent); staff (19 per cent); a fair degree of freedom in the prison (10 per cent); comradeship with other inmates (9 per cent); freedom from drugs and drug treatment programmes (9 per cent); generally positive (6 per cent); staff and other inmates (3 per cent).

Of the twenty-three women who held positive opinions about the staff, half were at Färingsö and five at open local neighbourhood prisons.

Negative views of imprisonment

Twenty per cent of the women did not reply to this question and two per cent had no negative view of imprisonment. The remainder thought that the following elements were of negative character: the staff were uninterested in them, lacked involvement and competence (9 per cent); the staff treated them unfairly and arbitrarily and favoured certain inmates (8 per cent); nearly everything (8 per cent); senior management behaved unfairly, lacked understanding and was generally poor (6 per cent); the prison environment which was experienced as suffocating, dismal with too few open places and too much locking-in (6 per cent); information (2 per cent); fellow inmates who were experienced as deceitful and trying (2 per cent).

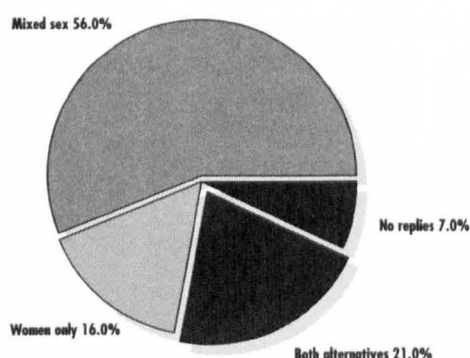
Of the 17 women who thought that the prison environment was suffocating and dismal, ten were at Hinseberg and five at Färingsö. All seven women who complained about senior management were at Hinseberg. Of eight women who complained additionally that social contact was disturbed by absence of telephone facilities and letter scrutiny, five were at Hinseberg. On the other hand no prisoner at Hinseberg complained about leisure or other activities.

Previous experience of imprisonment and attitudes to women's prisons

Sixty of the respondents had had previous experience of imprisonment. Thirteen per cent of the group had previously been at a prison for women only, 42 per cent had been at a mixed sex prison whilst 43 per cent had had experience of both types of prison. Half of the group had been in prison on one or two previous occasions, just over one-quarter had been in prison on three to five occasions and nearly one-fifth had been in prison six to fifteen times before. Asked where they would prefer to serve a fresh sentence if, in spite of

everything, they were reconvicted, 56 per cent said that they would prefer a mixed sex prison. Nineteen women were positive to the idea of serving such a sentence in a prison for women only. Of these half had not been in prison previously. Three had been previously in a prison for women only.

Where to serve a fresh sentence



More women at the Färingsö neighbourhood prison for women would prefer to serve a new sentence at a prison for women only than was the case at the open neighbourhood prisons and the closed neighbourhood prisons*.

Preference for a mixed sex prison was expressed by 66 women (56 per cent) for the following reasons:

- women are malicious and intrigue against each other;
- women and men live together outside prison;
- women and men function better together, this is more natural;
- the social climate is pleasanter and gentler when the sexes are mixed.

Preference for a women only prison was expressed by 19 women (16 per cent) for the following reasons:

- quieter when only women are together;
- need to be without men sometimes; fear and dislike for men;
- have had only experience of women prisons.

That both types of prison could be considered was expressed by 25 women (21 per cent) for the following reasons:

- variation, makes time go more quickly (mixed prison);
- makes no great difference, only thinking about getting through the sentence, locked up is locked up wherever one is.

Children

Forty-nine women (43 per cent) had children of less than 18 years whilst a further three women were pregnant. Of this group, 21 women (40 per cent) had children who were under seven years of age (including the unborn). 20 (38 per cent) had children who were more than seven but less than 15 years old whilst seven women's children were aged 15-18.

Eleven women (21 per cent) said that during imprisonment their children were in foster homes, 14 (27 per cent) stated that their children were with the father, in three cases the children were with a past or present partner and in 10 cases (19 per cent) with friends or relatives. No replies were received from eight women.

Nearly 60 per cent of the women had custody of their children. Three children were with their mothers in prison. Two of the three pregnant women expected to give birth during the serving of the sentence and that they would look after the child in prison. A local social welfare committee had decided in a further case that the child should join the mother in prison³.

Opinions on children in prison

Fifteen women did not answer this question. Nine women could not state an opinion. Of the remaining 95 women, nearly one-quarter were favourably inclined to allowing children to be with the mother in prison and nearly a further one-quarter were favourably inclined providing the child was very young (opinions differed on the definition of 'young' but in no case was the age more than three years). One third were favourably inclined. Finally, 20 women were ambivalent, seeing both advantages and disadvantages.

No statistically significant differences were found between prisons on the question of having children with the mother.

3. It is the general practice in Sweden that this question is decided by a local social welfare committee rather than the prison administration.

Miscellaneous opinions

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire gave room for the free expression of opinions. Thirty seven women (31 per cent) availed themselves of this opportunity. The replies were grouped under various headings - punishment and imprisonment, prison staff, occupation, drug treatment programmes, rules and disciplinary punishment, harassment, contact with the community, release and general viewpoints. In this shortened version of the report only certain of these headings are dealt with.

Drug treatment programmes

- Concerning the drug free wing: Those inmates on the drug free wing who are considered by the staff to be misusers of drugs are not in fact misusers - but the fact that they are there improves the prison's statistics on a 'successful' drug project. Those who **really** need and want to have drug treatment do not get onto the drug free wing. I wonder why. Is it because of untrained staff? Or the fear of worsened statistics? Or because they are nobody's favourite inmates?
- If a drug free programme is to give the support and help which we need in order to get back into the community it must provide for more independence. I mean our own work places and own buildings - not something inside the prison area. As it is now we have to put up with all the usual prison pressures and rules and these are difficult to unite with our needs and the help we want. Batshagen⁴, which is quite near, would be excellent for a drug free programme.
- It is a good thing to have a prison for women and even better to have several prisons for both men and women, for instance for married couples who want to keep their family going and to get treatment for drug misuse so that they can together work at coming off drugs.
- I think there should be a wing for those who do not use drugs.

Contact with the community

- It's difficult to phone to agencies, lawyers, etc, or to try to get a job.

They (the prison officers) promise us a certain time but then don't bother to call us up to the social work assistant when we shall make the call. We have only two numbers which we can ring freely (ie, automatic computer connections to two authorised numbers).

- At a men's prison like Österåker there is a flat for visitors where fathers can be with their wife and kids over the weekend. But here there is only one visiting room where you have to sit the whole time. It is tough to be so shut in with your children. Why can't we have the same opportunity? This is, after all, the only national prison for women in Sweden and most of us are mothers. The journeys are far too long for most to come for a three-hour visit.
- Visits should be open (i.e. not monitored) to a great extent.
- When the children come on a visit there is only the small, visiting room for the visit. Both my children are abroad. When they come to Sweden to visit me there ought to be a little visiting apartment so that I could be with them for the 2-3 days I am allowed to see them. Because of all this I have not seen my daughter for a year. She is two-and-a-half now and scarcely remembers me. There is no way one can have such a little child in such a small visiting room. It isn't natural.
- I wanted Färingsö since I have my child in Stockholm. The foster mother has nine children. She found out the train times to come here. Started in the morning, got home at 11 at night. What child can cope with that? I want to go to Stockholm but dare not mention it since I shall just get a blank refusal and they'll say I have too long a sentence. Then after a time - no matter how long it is - all they will say after they have looked at the papers is 'We have already gone into this question and said no'. There is almost no chance of being able to get away from here. And you can't get a visit from your husband in another prison either. You write for a visit but the application goes straight into the

4. A small neighbourhood prison near Hinseberg prison.

wastepaper basket and it's just about impossible to see your husband. The only thing that helps you to hold on are the adults around you. When my turn comes I shall give strengths to my children. But how shall I be able to give them strengths when I myself never get anything?

Release

- We are forced to work for 8 crowns per hour. No-one can keep a flat going because we can't pay the rent. Social welfare will only pay for six months. Could write a book on all that we have to put up with but you learn that it is not worth it. We are powerless here, without help or identity, though we only have ourselves to blame. Every one that goes out feels hatred against everyone and carries on with the same life as before. They are, sadly enough, forced to it. There's just no alternative but to go back to drugs or begin with breaking in, prostitution, selling drugs, etc. There are 25-year old girls going out from here with no money at all. What do you think their chances are? One girl got expelled to Norway without money. All they did was to get her a place in a youth hostel for one night!
- They must work more with getting somewhere to live for us and better after-care and have special persons working with motivation just for us inmates.
- Inmates need a chance when they come out a job, a flat and a lot of support if they aren't to fall into the shit again. If we have nothing to come out to then it's most often new crime to survive. What would you do if you didn't have somewhere to sleep and had no food, nothing? If you're not going to die of hunger then to survive you've got to steal or commit some other offence - mentally a strain, destroys your nerves ... inmates are mostly destroyed when they come out and aggressive.

General

- There's a lot one can write about that doesn't get covered by the

questionnaire. You should know that we women prisoners are grateful for research which looks at us since, hopefully, it can lead to an improvement for us in prison! And.. Perhaps more therapeutic communities and more backing from social welfare - both when we are inside and out! Perhaps even more understanding for our needs. We want to be men's equals - not just chucked on one side because we are a little group that does time for the crimes we commit or the drugs we take!!

Discussion

Single or mixed sex prison?

Most of the women said that if they were sentenced again to imprisonment they would prefer to serve their sentence in a prison with mixed sexes. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that mixed sex prisons, in which women are often a small minority, can give rise to relationship problems. Sexual contact can easily and thoughtlessly be made for even if the women have separate sleeping quarters there are opportunities for such contact during other times of the day or during leave from prison. Moreover, gender roles in criminal and drug misusing circles are such that the women are seen primarily as sex objects and are dominated by the men.

But even in prisons for women only sexuality creates problems. Research in other countries, and notably English and American research, strongly suggests that many women develop homosexual attachments during the time in prison even if they do not appear to continue with a homosexual lifestyle after release. Danish and Swedish studies, however, do not suggest that female prison homosexuality occurs especially often. This may be because imprisonment in Scandinavia tends to be much shorter than in England or America and there is also a more liberal practice concerning visits and leave from prison. A current Norwegian study of long term women prisoners⁵ reports, however, that, *inter alia*, homosexual relations were sometimes established in the Norwegian Bredtveit prison. Many of the women had lived lives which were marked by incest, prostitution, assaults and drug misuse as a result of which they had not

5. Haugsjerd, H Lævetann: *Bak murene på Bredtveit Kvinnefengsel*, H. Aschehough & Co. (W. Nygaard), Oslo 1992.

experienced loving relationships encompassing a satisfying sex life. In prison these women met active lesbians and also women who had become sexually awakened as the effects of drug misuse wore off. During lengthy prison sojourns in an isolated female society intensive attachments easily arise. Such attachments cause anxiety among fellow inmates. A pair which openly demonstrate their attachment to each other makes it harder for those without the possibility of being with those they love. And shifts in attachments are a cause of jealousy and sorrow in the everyday life of the prison.

In the light of the available research it is scarcely possible to argue that sexual and relationship problems are solved by choosing to have single or mixed sex prisons. Problems of this nature can emerge in both types of prison though the form in which they become manifest may differ. In the present study a preference for mixed sex prisons was expressed by a majority of the women prisoners. This may well be a more desirable general practice since it reflects life in the world outside prison - even with - and perhaps because of - the relationship difficulties that arise. But if mixed sex prisons are to be used it would seem essential that staff are both aware of, and trained, in handling gender roles with oppressive features.

Conclusions

Only a relatively small number desired to be placed in a prison for women only. The minority of women who wish to do so have the opportunity to serve their sentence in prisons reserved for women only. The number of places currently available at Hinseberg and Färingsö seems to be quite sufficient.

The needs expressed by the respondents concerning occupational activities and help with drug misuse seem to be less well provided for during enforcement of sentence. A large proportion of the women wanted more meaningful and vocationally oriented work and study as well as better organised leisure activities. If prison wings for 15-20 women in some neighbourhood prisons could replace the scattered single places in large number of neighbourhood prisons, it should be possible to provide work, studies, leisure pursuits and treatment programmes which would better meet the needs of women prisoners. Such a possibility can also provide opportunities to

learn about responsibility in relationships and the resolution of gender role conflicts. Staff training in gender roles and relationships is a prerequisite for providing such opportunities.

Drugs are one of the reasons why offences are committed. All forms of dealing with drugs are criminalised. Drugs are a threat to the resettlement and adjustment which is the desire of many women and the goal of correctional efforts. Bearing in mind that women often are more serious drug misusers than men it becomes especially important to enhance their motivation to stop using drugs and to create more drug treatment programmes for women.

Time in prison could also be used for participation in parenthood training so that inmates obtain a deeper insight into the child's needs and development. The question of having children in prison during the time that their mothers are serving a sentence should be examined more closely both with regard to the child's age and circumstances arising from the prison environment ■

Appendix

Sentenced women prisoners received into prison 1970-1991

Year	Number received	Proportion of all prisoners
1970	172	1,6
1971	162	1,7
1972	168	1,6
1973	217	2,2
1974	169	1,9
1975	186	1,9
1976	197	2,0
1977	243	2,5
1978	232	2,2
1979	299	2,8
1980	397	3,3
1981	475	3,6
1982	520	3,8
1983	576	3,8
1984	560	3,8
1985	546	4,0
1986	644	4,5
1987	632	4,2
1988	784	4,9
1989	739	4,8
1990	727	4,6
1991	624	4,6

(Source: Swedish Prison and Probation Administration statistics)

PREVIOUS RESEARCH PAPERS

Research paper No.1

The österåker project - a further follow-up of the drug misuser programme at österåker prison

O Berggren, H Svärd

Research paper No.2

Post-prison and post-probation recidivism. Two studies
J Gustavsson, L Krantz, K Engman

Research paper No.3

Mentally disturbed offenders in neighbourhood prisons
L Somander