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Sex and Gender in Prisons

The background of the cover features a dark, textured surface with several glowing, organic, and somewhat abstract shapes. These shapes are primarily in shades of green and red, with some yellow and blue highlights. They appear to be interconnected and have a fluid, almost cellular quality, reminiscent of biological structures or perhaps a stylized map of a region. The overall aesthetic is scientific and somewhat mysterious.

# The experiences of women prison governors

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## Background

**Historically, prisons in the UK have been male-dominated organisations, driven by both the predominantly male prison population and societal views about the type of work women should undertake. The situation today appears more balanced. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) appointed its first woman CEO and women occupy an increasing number of senior positions: 72 of 192 (37.5 per cent) governor and senior civil servant roles in public sector prisons and headquarters<sup>1</sup>. There is increasing academic, media and public attention towards the issue of gender equality in the workplace. Organisations are now compelled to publish their gender pay gap data and challenged to improve diversity and ensure the equitable experience of women at work.**

Leadership literature cautions against using representation alone as a yardstick for equality, indicating that the benefits of workforce gender diversity are reduced in traditionally male-dominated organisations<sup>2</sup>. There has been little specific study of women governors in the UK, however, a recurring theme within the small governor research base is the indication that women working in prisons encounter greater challenges than their male colleagues. In his exploration of prison management, Bennett<sup>3</sup> found that officers and managers made stereotypical projections about the leadership styles and capabilities of women governors, giving a sense of the challenging environment women were forced to negotiate. Whilst already having to justify their authority as a governor, women faced a further battle to justify their presence both within the prison environment and the governor role, because of their gender. In interviews with governors and senior leaders in the prison service, Liebling and Crewe<sup>4</sup> found that women leaders

described additional challenges compared with their male counterparts, often criticising their experiences and appearing to disproportionately leave the service. The authors described the occurrence of a 'cultural awakening' about the experiences and challenges faced by women working in the operational prison environment. However, such an awakening requires action and the research did not indicate any activities taking place to drive a cultural change to bring experiences of staff in line with the values of the organisation.

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with 12 women governors and two more senior women leaders within HMPPS. Pseudonyms are used and quotes and examples have been anonymised. This article begins with a reflection on studying gender within HMPPS. It will then discuss participants' early and negative experiences, how they adapt and construct their identity as a woman governor, the relationships important to this identity, and the impact of motherhood. This article will also explore key themes relating to prison service culture, including perceptions of the organisation and how resilience and emotion are perceived. The conclusion includes comments on possible next steps and the need for future research and activity to consider the race and intersectionality.

## Researching gender in the prison service

This article draws from a wider thesis exploring how women prison governors develop a sense of self-legitimacy. The thesis was undertaken in 2017 as part of a Masters in Criminology, Penology and Management at the University of Cambridge, funded by HMPPS. My interest in the experiences of women governors is influenced largely by my experiences as a woman manager within prisons and my observation that women working in prisons appeared to face

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1. HMPPS Annual Staff Equalities report 2017/18. Retrieved on 22nd September 2019 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-staff-equalities-report-2017-to-2018>
  2. Guillaume, Y., Dawson, J., Woods, S., Sacramento, C. and West, M. 2013. 'Getting diversity at work to work: What we know and what we still don't know', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 86(2): 123-141.
  3. Bennett, J. 2016. *The Working Lives of Prison Managers: Global Change, Local Culture and Individual Agency in the Late Modern Prison*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
  4. Liebling, A. & Crewe, B. 2015. 'Governing Governors', *Prison Service Journal*, 222: 3-10.

unique challenges which the organisation might need to explore. Personal experiences and subsequent beliefs are undeniably brought to my research. However, conscious efforts were made to identify the potential for bias and implement mitigating procedures. The interview schedule was directed by the literature review, a pilot interview allowed testing for any bias and the semi-structured nature of the interview facilitated free conversation.

Participants were supportive but often appeared uncomfortable when discussing gender. This manifested itself in an eagerness to emphasise that men have difficult experiences too, that women can contribute to difficult experiences and additionally, that not all women are the same. This reflects complexities present within the wider discourse about women and gender that are currently being played out in society and the media. These complicate the exploration of the experiences of women as they present an intimation that women's experiences are diminished by the fact that men experience the same or because women also demonstrate problematic behaviour. This in itself is an example of how stereotypical views prohibit equality.

I set out to understand how women experience their roles and build their sense of confidence and as such my research should not have been taken to imply anything about male governors. Yet, from the outset I was asked why I wasn't studying men, the question always framed in the negative as opposed to enquiring why I had chosen to focus on women. People outside the study were curious about whether there was a more specific intention and one senior male colleague even implied that uncovering any challenging findings might negatively impact my career. This has not been my experience and I received wide support to turn the research into action.

### **Early and negative experiences**

Participants described being conscious of, and concerned about, how they would be received by their colleagues because of their gender. Their concerns were shaped by their early experiences within the male-dominated prison environment. About half of the participants disclosed dealing with inappropriate sexist or misogynistic behaviour earlier in their careers, including verbal harassment from colleagues which

would constitute misconduct. This is not to say that negative experiences exclusively occurred early in careers, but those which did appear to be most impactful and frequently recalled.

*I was fast track, a lot younger than most of them and a woman and I was really keen to get on...they hated it and [the manager] that I was paired up with on my first weekend called me a stupid bitch eight times. Lydia*

It was striking that the memory of these experiences stayed with participants through their careers, emphasising the importance of recognising that such situations occur, and exploring the extent to which they persist and can be prevented. It is also notable that these women did choose to remain in post and achieve promotions, and this will be explored further in discussion about what resilience means in the prison service.

*I don't even know if I did overcome it if I'm really honest. I got through it, I'm not sure that's overcoming. Sian*

Formative career experiences were not always described in the context of gender, with many participants referring to the overarching moral complexity of prison work and the pressure this creates when young or junior in role. One woman referred specifically to the challenging culture present when she began working in prisons in the early 1990s.

*I often think that my [time] as an officer was probably one of the most damaging experiences of my life. I was just really struggling as a young woman in my mid-20s to come to terms with what the service seemed to expect of me...It wasn't just that some of it was upsetting, it was that your norm disappears. I can remember being conscious that I didn't know what was right or wrong anymore. Sian*

This participant described an incredibly unsettling start to her career which involved exposure to distressing events. Despite the lack of specific reference to gender it is notable that she, and about a third of others, were describing experiences which took place in

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the 1990s and early 2000s where they were often amongst the first women to hold managerial positions.

*I've worked in a lot of prisons where it's been a very male culture, and I didn't want to be part of that. I think it feels quite isolating. It did feel quite lonely I think as a woman. Alicia*

This indicates that, perhaps due to the limited number of women working in the service during that time, there was very little support for, and acceptance of, women in the prison service. Such an isolating environment early in careers would make women particularly vulnerable and left participants questioning their place. Participants were keen to emphasise the cultural shift which had taken place since, citing more women in senior roles and a reduction in the prevalence and degree of sexist and misogynistic behaviour witnessed. However they were equally aware that as a governor they are less likely to observe such behaviour directly should it occur and several expressed a desire to try and improve how the organisation supports women, and a regret they had not done so sooner. They believed that particular challenges still endured yet were not always overt. For example, a participant referred to the more subtle challenges brought about by working in an environment dominated by the presence of men, such as sexualised behaviour from prisoners and having to enter cells covered in pornography. Participants also noted negative and frustrated opinions about women on fast-track schemes, gendered views that women have a greater propensity for corruption and anecdotal evidence that women remain less likely to be given leadership roles in security or larger, more complex prisons.

### **Adapting and constructing identity — Emotion and Resilience in the prison service**

As previously noted, the original thesis on which this article is based explored how women prison governors develop a sense of self-legitimacy. Defined as 'the cultivation of self-confidence in the moral rightness of the power-holder's authority' Bottoms and Tankebe<sup>5</sup>

recognised legitimate authority as 'involving claims to legitimacy by power-holders and responses by audiences', emphasising the role of the power-holder's sense of self in the legitimate use of authority.

Participants described consciously constructing their identity as a woman governor as they progressed through their careers. This conscious process was a result of being aware of preconceptions colleagues and leaders held about them due to their gender, which were reinforced by sexist experiences such as those described above. As a result, approximately half of governors described actively adapting their identity early in their careers, adopting what they thought would be viewed as more acceptable and legitimate. Overt examples referenced clothing and displays of emotion.

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*I would never have worn a skirt suit or a dress when I was a function head, ever... I think that was about not wanting to look different from my [male] colleagues in a lot of senses. My identity was absolutely focused on playing down being women. Ellen*

Adapting dress has been explained as women trying to make themselves less visible to others so as to mitigate the potential for being stereotyped based on their gender<sup>6</sup>. Similarly to clothing choices, some participants described hiding displays of emotion as a method of reducing the likelihood that they would be negatively labelled. This highlights how emotion and resilience are perceived within prison service culture. Many felt that being outwardly emotional such as crying or showing upset was seen as weakness, and they directly linked these cultural perceptions to their reticence to show these sides of themselves. Displaying emotion and even being privately emotional complicated some participants' confidence in their ability as a leader and again this affect was more pronounced when they were newer to their roles.

*I don't think I should show any weakness as a governor... it would be no good if I started flapping or getting upset about things or showing I didn't know what I was doing*

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5. Bottoms, A. & Tankebe, J. 2012. 'Beyond procedural justice: A dialogic approach to legitimacy in criminal justice', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 102(1): 119-170.
  6. Chugh, S. and Sahgal, P. 2007. 'Why do few women advance to leadership positions?' *Global Business Review*, 8(2): 351-365.

*because that's not helpful for anybody if the governor is getting emotional about stuff. As a woman, nobody is going to have much truck with that. Rhiannon*

Rhiannon's quote clearly shows that she felt that displays of emotion would be conflated with ineptitude and concerningly internalised this into her own assessment of her abilities. Previous research has described women as alienated by the term 'resilience'<sup>4</sup> because of negative views of the way the organisations appeared to interpret and apply the term. Participants suggested that within the prison service, being resilient was often interpreted as getting on with things regardless, as opposed to managing the natural impacts of demanding and often distressing work. Therefore, they often felt their authentic style would be at odds with the stereotypical image of a resilient leader with the implication that they were unable to be accepted as their authentic selves or seen as a legitimate leader within HMPPS.

Leadership studies identify stereotyping as the root of issues faced by women in leadership roles. Eagly and Karau<sup>7</sup> proposed that discrimination against women is caused by discrepancies between presumptions about gender and leadership which result in women being viewed as less likely than men to fit the model of a successful leader. The qualities of an effective leader are more often labelled as male attributes and women who break from type and exhibit behaviour associated with leaders can be viewed critically, resulting in unfair discrimination. Stereotyping threatens the progression of women within organisations and impacts how women identify with their profession, reducing motivation, performance and engagement and resulting in a lack of women in leadership roles<sup>8</sup>. The persistence of such bias is concerning and has a significant practical impact for those at the receiving end. In the current context of HMPPS these experiences are at odds with the values and direction being publicised from the centre. This creates a juxtaposition between what people hear and

what they experience and suggests a disconnect between policy and delivery. It was common to hear women say that they were often unsure what style of leadership the organisation really wanted. Perceptions of the organisation are explored further later in this article.

There were a number of instances where participants were able to challenge the aspects of the prison service culture they disagreed with. Where governors did view their authentic leadership style as a strength and a legitimate part of their identity this contributed to their confidence to refrain from adapting their leadership style. One Governor detailed openly crying in front of staff following a traumatic incident. She described consciously deciding not to hide that she was upset.

*He [area manager] said to me 'you can't be showing emotions to staff' and I said, 'well why can't I?' I think it's a sign of strength to be yourself and show that you care and actually the response that I got was brilliant and I use that approach all the way through. Lydia*

Actions to adapt identity appeared confined to experiences earlier in careers. More experienced governors reflected with hindsight that permanently adapting your personal style is neither necessary nor sustainable.

*I think that as a woman in a still quite male-dominated organisation it's important that we are clear about our own identities and don't apologise for that or feel that we have to somehow behave in a particular way because we are constantly working around men. Audrey*

Participants' eventual confidence to behave authentically appeared to develop as their faith in their identity as a leader developed. This progression may be reflective of the combination of increasing maturity, skill and confidence as well as the protection provided by

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between  
presumptions about  
gender and  
leadership which  
result in women  
being viewed as less  
likely than men to  
fit the model of a  
successful leader.

7. Eagly, A and Karau, S. 2002. 'Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders', *Psychological Review*, 109(3):573-598.

8. Hoyt, C. and Murphy, S. 2016. 'Managing to clear the air: stereotype threat, women, and leadership', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27:387-399.

their increasing seniority and the cultural shift noted by those with the longest service. However, no participants cited any clear actions by the organisation to counter the bias they experienced, or directly improve their confidence to be themselves. Indeed, some governors referenced senior leaders contributing to, rather than challenging, these negative cultural messages, as seen in Lydia's comment above.

It is important to note that pressures to demonstrate particular leadership styles may not be confined to women. In fact, a number of governors recognised the advantages of their gender, stating that male colleagues might not reap the same benefits.

*I think that there is a sense, because a lot of the decisions we make are around people who are vulnerable, that there aren't many barriers to what I might say. It is okay for me to talk very openly and for people to make the assumption that I will...for a man there may be implicit barriers to that, but for me it seems like a much more straightforward dialogue.*  
Rhiannon

This raises questions about how masculinity and men are viewed within the prison service. While women governors might be discriminated against for not conforming to a male leadership style, as Rhiannon suggests, empathy with vulnerability is deemed a desirable feminine trait that male governors might lack the ability to freely express. Male governors who do not conform to the stereotypes of male leaders may also experience similar challenges to female governors.

### Perceptions of the organisation

Participants had suspicions about which leadership styles were perceived as effective by the organisation, stating that although the organisation provided positive messages about equality and diversity, in practice some senior leaders continued to favour traditional male stereotypes of leadership when recruiting governors.

*I still think there is a slight tendency towards a safe pair of hands meaning a very experienced male governor and I think sometimes that's the tendency in terms of filling those posts.* Diana

This created a sense amongst some participants that recruitment and promotion was not entirely procedurally just. Some participants perceived that due to the bias they experienced within the organisation about their abilities they had to work harder than their male colleagues, and deal with more challenge, to reap the same reward. The wider literature recognises that women are often required to demonstrate increased effectiveness to be viewed as equally competent to men<sup>9</sup>.

Notably, perceptions about the presence of women in senior leader positions varied and influenced how women felt about the fair progression of women.

*You go to the Governing Governors Forum [GGF] and it is still overwhelmingly white male. [It makes me feel] a bit disheartened actually and a bit concerned that it's not necessarily the best people that are being promoted...I can think of a lot of women who have chosen to leave the service and go on to different things.* Diana

...perceptions about the presence of women in senior leader positions varied and influenced how women felt about the fair progression of women.

*I would have said a minimum of 40-45 per cent are women and more are coming through. I think there is that recognition that it isn't a male dominated environment.* Audrey

HMPPS equality data shows that women hold just over a third of operational posts at governor grades. Length of service may influence perceptions; Audrey was the longest serving participant and had seen the prison service change over time whereas Diana was newer to governing and still forging her career. Additionally, women governors and senior leaders are not located evenly across the country. Regions with fewer women managers may need to do more to improve these perceptions.

Representation is not an adequate measure of the quality of women's experiences in prison leadership. Regardless of the figures, negative perceptions about the number of women in senior positions had a detrimental impact on their attachment to the organisation and their sense that they were a legitimate leader or a good fit for HMPPS. Several participants gave examples of perceiving that women had been overlooked for a role and this led to them questioning whether they met the desired leadership style and if the

9. Carli, L. 1999. 'Gender, interpersonal power and social influence', *Journal of Social Issues* 55(1):81-99.

organisation didn't want them, why was that? Addressing perceptions is difficult, however supportive solutions are likely to lie in bridging the gap between the stated values of HMPPS, and the experiences of women in the workplace.

### **Motherhood and work-life balance**

Every participant, regardless of whether they had children, raised concerns about the challenges facing women governors balancing family and work commitments, and nine of the fourteen raised their role as a parent. In addition to the practical challenges this presented, mothers described an increased emotional toll of their work.

*[You feel] all of the time like you are not in the right place. If you are here you're not there and if you're there you're not here. That [is a] very real impact on women and what they feel. Sian*

Several governors had received work-life balance adjustments providing them with a requested change to their working hours and/or location, but most reported difficult experiences. It was generally felt such arrangements were only recently becoming more frequent and acceptable for women in senior leadership positions.

*When I came back to work after my first child...I remember being told by my line-manager not to tell anybody that I was working four days a week because it wasn't really something that was done...It was very much a dirty secret because if it ever got out, people wouldn't approve. Alicia*

Several participants were noticeably animated about what they perceived as a failure by HMPPS to get this right for women and, although not measurable in this study, it was certainly their perception that male colleagues did not experience this emotional toll to the same extent. Enduring historical beliefs about the social roles of men and women put additional pressure on working mothers. Some participants felt this was a difficulty experienced by women in any career path, however the context of the organisation seemed to create a natural rub with work-life balance with governors expected to be present at work for long hours and accessible at home. One governor gave an example of a gate officer bidding them good afternoon when they arrived at 8.30am after the school run. Additionally, due to the limited number of governor positions, the

expectation to move around the country is perhaps greater than in other organisations. Participants who were mothers felt compelled to make choices which had affected the pace of their career. Lydia described declining a promotion.

*The reality is some places are just too far to travel and it doesn't make any sense...I would have ended up feeling like a crap mum and a crap governor because I can't do either to the best of my ability. Lydia*

### **Relationships**

When considering what supported them through difficult situations participants spoke of their relationships with colleagues. Several described actively seeking out like-minded peers when faced with challenges as officers and junior managers, akin to findings in prison officer research that relationships with peers are key to the cultivation of self-legitimacy<sup>10</sup>. Alicia explained that when she was early in service peer relationships appeared to be the only factor which prevented her leaving:

*I can pinpoint the time I had a crisis about... whether I am the type of person the prison service wants... And I suppose looking at some of [my women peers] and talking to them and realising that some of them felt the same as me or a lot of them were behaving the same as me...that sort of got me through really. Alicia*

In contrast, participants cited the unique and isolated nature of governing as limiting the level of support they sought or received from peers in their current roles. Those in their first governing roles seemed to feel the impact of this more acutely than those who had been governing longer.

*The governor's job can be quite lonely...when I am governing I don't tend to have that much contact with people. I tend to just be in my own world and I just get very focused on what's going on in the prison. Lydia*

Women in leadership positions more frequently align themselves with transformational styles of leadership and in doing so they differ from men who adopt transactional approaches more often.<sup>11</sup> This might begin to explain the perceptions of women that they are not the right fit in an organisation heavily focused on

10. Tankebe, J. 2010. 'Identifying the correlates of police organisational commitment in Ghana'. *Police Quarterly*, 13(1): 73-91.

11. Eagly, A., Johanssen-Schmidt, M. and Engen, M. 2003. 'Transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men', *Psychological bulletin*, 129(4): 569-591.

audits and compliance. Transformational leaders are democratic and motivate others to meet their vision through interpersonal skills, whilst transactional leaders prefer to set expectations and reward the meeting of targets<sup>12</sup>. Female and male governors might therefore also experience relationships with colleagues in different ways.

*Women have a place and are quite good at what they do because the way they influence is very different. Audrey*

Participants raised the importance of their relationship with their line manager. Most described a preference for a close and critical line-manager relationship and reflecting previous research<sup>4</sup>, were positive about their current line-managers regardless of the gender of the manager.

*My line-manager makes me feel valued...I genuinely believe that they understand the role...but genuinely hold me to account...It makes me feel as though it matters to them...That line management, not just support, but actual management of me makes me feel valued and that's hugely important. Bethan*

Being able to have a critical but constructive conversation strengthened the relationship. Governors wanted their managers to view them as effective but were confident to turn to them during times of difficulty. Emphasising the significance of this relationship, participants worried about the impact if the relationship did not have the right dynamic. A change of line-manager was a critical event, viewed with anxiety.

*If that manager changes it makes you feel perhaps a bit insecure at times, because things can change quite quickly. People are popular and then they are not popular and that can change all sorts of things. Rhiannon*

This relationship affects the quality of women's experiences and a good line-manager relationship may improve wellbeing and staff retention. It is important not to fall into a trap of believing that women need mentors and line-managers who are also women. Gender of line-manager was not a factor in these interviews emphasising that men can be important allies. Reinforcement from line managers supported women governor's sense of self-legitimacy and improved how they felt at work. There will be value in considering how to strengthen such relationships and also in exploring

whether male governors hold this relationship in similarly high regard.

## Conclusion

This article has reflected on interviews with women prison governors and the influence of their gender upon their experiences. The research corroborated that women working in prisons do face unique challenges due to their gender, including stereotypical judgements, sexism and the impact of becoming a working mother. Recognition and discussion of these issues is a difficult but essential first step in addressing them. The culture of the service appears at odds with messages it distributes about the importance of diversity and equality. Women recounted negative experiences and perceived bias in recruitment and progression processes. In response, many women tried to adapt their leadership and some questioned whether they were the kind of leader the service really wants. However, the line manager role appeared to provide significant support for women governors. It would be beneficial to extend this research by interviewing male governors, to see whether similar concerns are raised and identify appropriate support.

It is important that further research and action considers the roles of race and intersectionality in experiences. This article has discussed the role of identity and perceptions within experiences. Women who are further marginalised due to racism and homophobia, for example, will have acutely more painful experiences. Marcia Morgan<sup>13</sup> explains how the roles of gender and race intersect to further affect experiences and complicate how women perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Experiencing racism, mistrust, isolation and discomfort persistently impacts how women feel within the workplace and how they choose to project their identity to cope with the experiences they are faced with.

It would be remiss not to conclude with the reflection that the organisation has considered the findings of this research. Many senior leaders came forward to offer their support, and subsequently developed a working group to support women working in operational roles. Through the working group the wider experiences of women have been highlighted and a number of senior men and women have now made public statements about their commitment to diversity and the behaviours they expect, indicating a more tangible 'cultural awakening' which could lead to real improvements for women in the workplace. However, it is only with persistent change that the cultural shift required to reduce negative incidents and bring experiences in line with organisational values can take place.

12. Judge, T. and Piccolo, R. 2004. 'Transformational and transactional leadership: A meta-analysis of their relative validity', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(5): 755-768.

13. Morgan, M. 2018. *Black Women Prison Employees: The Intersectionality of Gender and Race* Edwin Mellen Press.