



ON THE INSIDE

An ex-prisoner tells her story

Women account for only 4 per cent of the prison population of England and Wales (Home Office 1990). They encounter a routine which infantilises and degrades (Carlen, 1983; Dobash et al 1986). Many refuse to conform; women prisoners are more likely than men to face disciplinary charges (NACRO 1989). Whatever their prison experience, establishing a new life is not easy. Here Tina tells her story to Mary Eaton.

Tina received a four year sentence for armed robbery. She persistently challenged the system and then absconded for three months. Eventually, she gave herself up. She lost 10 months remission and came out earlier this year.

What I intended to do was just block off - just get on with it. I'd had my down days but I was there, I had to be there and get on with it. I used to get into every kind of skulduggery that was going like making drink, making alcohol.... You get one of the kitchen girls to get some yeast, everybody just saves all their fruit and put it in a bucket, feed it with sugar all the time and it just ferments.... it gives you a stomachache, but you still get drunk.... For a little while we had it in a cupboard in the dining room but it began to stink, so we put it under the stairs in a staircase which has a lot of air going through. Then you'd pass officers on the stairs knowing that this bucket of hooch was underneath. I used to thrive on that.... that was the way I did my prison sentence.... messing around and getting them back all the time.

Alcohol was not the only available drug:

There's so much cannabis in prison, you can just get it if you want it.... and you can get heroin in prison as well if you want it - you can't get it in abundance, but you can get it now and again.

Searches, by officers were fruitless:

They come in and they 'room spin' - turn your room over and I'd just laugh. They'd be basic grade officers who do your room. What they do is they come in and strip search you and then you sit outside your room on a chair so you can observe what they're doing - supposedly.... I used to tor-

ment the life out of them. I'd say "It must be terrible - that lot round there (the senior officers) sit there and it's always you who have to do the dirty work, get all your skirts dirty" ... and they know what I'm doing and they're furious, absolutely furious and I know they're never going

to find anything in my room because I'm not going to leave anything in my room... because anything I wanted to look after I just used to put it in a cup or a bag and swing it down to the person who was underneath me... once you're there a while you know what you're doing and they never had a hope-in-hell's chance of finding anything.... that's just how I used to do my time - all the time just getting back at them.

Inevitably, Tina's attitude led to actions which resulted in disciplinary charges, loss of remission and time in the punishment block. Nevertheless even here she managed to take a degree of control by pre-empting the officers' commands:

You have to have a strip search when you go to the punishment block so I just walked in and started strip-ping off before I went to my cell.

Tina explained that like most women she used to be terrified at the prospective humiliation of a strip search but such fear works for the system and against the prisoner.

You've got to do it so I just sort of reversed it and whenever I got a strip search or went to the block before they could say 'Right take your clothes off' I used to be handing them my clothes.... I just had to change it round really and get in before they did.

Not surprisingly, Tina was unpopular with the staff.

No one would employ me. I'd put in for jobs and no one would employ me. I couldn't work anywhere in Holloway... So when you don't do anything - you don't go off the wing to gym or work or anything, you're the landing cleaner. So you do your work and by about 10 o'clock you've finished. I'd just plop in front of the telly. You used to be locked in your cell but



Inside

the new governor doesn't want that, he wants people to be out and about... I might be starving at breakfast but I used to save my bread purposely, and when I'd done all the cleaning I'd go and make toast. The screws would all be busy doing their things and I'd put the telly on - now the telly room is right by the office - it's open plan so that they can see into the telly room - and I'd have all my toast - even if I didn't want it sometimes I'd make and make my tea and sit there. It used to drive them insane.

One morning a new prison officer, unaware of the new rules, attempted to lock Tina into her cell after cleaning. Tina protested loudly and vehemently and the principal officer came to the scene. The ensuing exchange was abusive and Tina defiantly awaited the next disciplinary charge.

At dinner time she (the principal officer) came up to me and said 'I've got a job for you... I'm giving you a red band.' Now, I've gone from unemployable to having a trustee band which means you can just go around the prison... I was just laughing because I was thinking 'What is going on here?' What had happened was they'd started the Activity Centre where all the pre-release courses are run, we'd never had a pre-release course before in Holloway, and met this officer Miss A.

Tina later learned that the new governor planned to introduce a number of rehabilitation programmes. Miss A. had been on a training course to run a pre-release course and had been given a space which needed cleaning and preparing for running such courses. Tina was assigned to Miss A. as a last attempt to find her some work.

I went down there, and she's an



TATTOOS

'I Love Stevie...True'

A young woman begins a degree course at University. She has travelled a long way from institutional so-called 'care', passing through Remand Assessment Centres, Borstals and Prisons before arriving at an Oxbridge College. En route, and in addition to picking up all the aids to self-devastation that particular journey provides, she also covered two arms with those permanent reminders — tattoos.

Already on an N.H.S. waiting list for two years, she might, if she's lucky, have them removed before she graduates. In the meantime she will keep her arms covered - she sweltered in an overlong sleeved cardigan during the summer heat wave. She won't, although she enjoys it, swim and she will always be fearful that for some reason or other she will have to pull up her sleeves. If her arms are exposed the other students will be able to read a selection of the early scratchings



Chris Wroblewski

of most borstal girls.... 'Love', 'Hate', 'I Love Stevie...True', 'Mum', or even more revealingly, 'The Only Good Screw is a Dead One', 'All Filth are Bastards', 'Devil's Disciple' etc, etc.

Another young woman recently removed a Star of David from her forehead with a stanley knife. The scar was terrible but better than the tattoo, she said, because now she could tell people she had been accidentally burned. She too was on the N.H.S. waiting list.

If our aim is to integrate ex-prisoners into the community they should be prioritised on N.H.S. waiting lists, and

girls and women should not, in the vain hope of speedier removal, have to resort to a psychiatrist for a diagnosis of depression, or worse to acts of self-mutilation.

The Prison Medical Service should ensure that, for any prisoner who so chooses, tattoos are removed. The tattoos should be removed by an N.H.S. specialist in an outside hospital and in sufficient time before release for the scars to heal.

Surely this most brutal display of disaffection should, rather than sickening and shaming the bearer, sicken and shame those associated with the incarceration and punishment of children and young adults. We believe the very least they should do is facilitate the removal of tattoos.

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continued from previous page

officer through and through. She said "If you do anything wrong I'm going to nick you, but if you play ball with me we'll be alright." And that was fine by me because I knew exactly where I stood... She was straight with me and I like straight, up front, people... I really liked being at the Activity Centre... I was making posters, doing a lot of the administrative things, finding out who was going to be released, seeing if they wanted to come on the course... She just really treated me as an equal. She'd say to me 'What do you think about this?' When we first started it was a one week course and we were getting agencies in, like N.A.C.R.O. and other agencies. She'd say to me 'You can see it totally different from me...' And I don't know what happened to me... I don't know whether it was because I felt I was being treated as an equal... but I enjoyed being down there and I enjoyed saying my bit. And I really got things together from there. The officers on the wing used to say 'You're still the same, we're not having it, you've not changed.' But I was changing, I was changing... And in all this I started seeing the officers

as not just a band of people. I started seeing them as individuals, there's good and there's bad... I think that helped me - seeing the officers as individuals helped me a lot. I think Miss A. was the main person that helped me to do that. She treated me as an equal and it just went on from there.

Tina then began to go out from Holloway to work in the offices of a project for ex-prisoners. Her only previous work experience had been as a teenager working for a few weeks in a delicatessen. Working on the project drew on Tina's experience and skills; the value of her contribution was acknowledged by the organisers. However, although this voluntary work continued once she had left prison it was not enough to alleviate the difficulties that she faces as an ex-prisoner.

I started getting really despondent. When you come out of prison you want to get a flat and you want to get a job... I just know that I didn't want to go back to prison anymore and to not go back to prison you can't commit crime... I'd had a 10 year run but I eventually got a 4 year sentence... I was doing the voluntary work but I started getting despondent because

I'd had loads of job applications - I feel that the best work for me to be involved in is something that I know about. I don't know very much but I do know about prisoners and ex-prisoners... and I was applying for all these jobs, like housing associations that housed ex-prisoners, and I've never ever been even short-listed. And I can understand it because people look at your application and I can't really offer very much. Well I can offer - I know that I'd be really good for the job but when you haven't got any work experience people just don't know. I do understand it, but it's just so frustrating Mary, you know what I mean?

References

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