

# Women's Imprisonment at the Millennium

Pat Carlen asks whether recent visionary reforms in women's prisons go far enough.

Women's imprisonment in Britain is no longer invisible. Scandal upon scandal during the 1990s - seven suicides in quick succession at Cornton Vale in Scotland, a Holloway Prison too filthy for a shocked Chief Inspector to inspect, and media reports of manacled mothers and degrading methods of drugs-testing - have all contributed



Julie Grogan

to a new women-wise penal agenda involving the Prison Department, Probation Service and a variety of other agencies. Yet, despite the higher public and Prison Department profiling which women's prisons in England, Wales and Scotland achieved by the end of the 1990s, it should never be forgotten that, during the greater part of the decade, women's imprisonment was shaped more by policies geared to male prisoners or political expediency than by policies fashioned especially for the in-prison care and after-prison resettlement of female prisoners. So, lest we forget that, even in the brave new managerialist world of Key Performance Indicators, Regime Standards and 'Strategies' for everything that moves, it is still easier to deliver paper-policy than policy itself. Let us review the context which occasioned the Prison Department's long overdue recognition that women prisoners really are different to men and that, in the name of both justice and a crime-reductive penal policy, prison regimes should reflect this difference.

Between 1990 and 1998 the female prison population doubled. By March 31st 1999 it had reached 3176, comprising 4.9 per cent of the total prison population. This steep increase in the size of the female population coincided with a tumultuous period in prison politics.

Between 1988 and 1994 three consecutive Home Secretaries each attempted to remodel penal administration in a fundamentally different way: prison reductionism (Douglas Hurd); prison privatization (Kenneth Clarke); and security fetishism (Michael Howard). These rapid about-turns in penal philosophy were accompanied by increases both in public punitiveness and the numbers of women living in poverty. There was also an intensification of the ideological attacks on young, single mothers. Small wonder, therefore, that the female prison population increased, and that several of the security changes in prison management (themselves the consequence of a number of politically embarrassing break-outs from the men's gaols) impacted with especial harshness on the overstretched women's institutions, many of which were

receiving inmates who had been inappropriately allocated (eg. highly disturbed youngsters to open establishments, or mothers to prisons far from their homes) because of the strains imposed by such a rapid expansion of the system.

Once in prison, in the mid 1990s, women were subjected not only to the usual pains of imprisonment, but, additionally, to gender-specific indignities and pains engendered by new security procedures hastily implemented without appropriate adaptation to women's different biological and social attributes - or even their very different (ie. overwhelmingly non-dangerous) criminal profiles. Especially shocking innovations were: the manacling of mothers in labour; mandatory drug testing which involved prisoners urinating in front of two female officers; more intrusive random strip searching (in one case by male officers) justified as part of a general 'war on drugs' in prison; and the patrolling of women's quarters by male officers (an ironic consequence of the Prison Department's 1988 Opposite Sex Postings Agreement, aimed at promoting equality of opportunity for male and female prison officers).

The already over-strained situation in the women's prisons was aggravated even further by budget cuts, increased paperwork for prison officers, and the oft-expressed views of staff that female prisoners were just not high priority as far as Prison Headquarters was concerned (see Carlen 1998). In 1997 the Chief Inspector published his damning thematic review of the women's prisons (Chief Inspector of Prisons 1997).

## Guarded optimism

Since then, much has changed. In 1997 a Women's Policy Unit was established within the Prison Department and a full time Director took up post in 1998. Extra money in prison budgets appears to have made some previously-cynical governors much more positive about the feasibility of implementing new initiatives and programmes. A training pack has been developed for male officers working with women, and there is a more explicit recognition by prison managers that the needs of women

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prisoners are indeed different to those of their male counterparts. Imprisonment of 15 and 16 year old girls has ended, and it is expected that many more women will benefit from the Home Detention Curfew. Even reports from usually-critical observers suggest that certain women’s

prisons have been ‘turned around’ by the zeal and vision of particular prison governors and/or other key staff. From North of the Border the same, well supported, story of visionary and principled reform is told about Scotland’s Cornton Vale.

But piecemeal reform is not

enough. Nor is the state of the women’s prisons solely dependent upon Prison Department policy-making. A more effective response to women lawbreakers requires not only a qualitative reduction in the incarcerative damage done to the very serious offenders who will undoubtedly continue to be gaoled, but also a quantitative reduction in the numbers of non-dangerous women presently held in custody. Yet variations in policy implementation between prisons, together with wide ‘interpretations’ of sentencing guidelines, suggest that if these reductionist objectives are to be met there must be a much greater emphasis on policy enforcement and compliance within penal institutions, as well as a closer scrutiny of, and greater controls on, the sentencing of female offenders. Indeed, the history of penal politics suggests that until there is both a strengthening of Prison Department policy-compliance and enforcement procedures, and a limitation on the custodial sentencing powers of the

magistrates and judges, new policy initiatives are likely to remain statements of intent, merely papering over the cracks until the next round of crises and ‘embarrassments’ occur in the female estate.

At the Millennium, then, there are grounds for being at least cautiously optimistic about the future of women’s imprisonment. Until, however, there is a less fragmented approach to criminal justice, the visionary policies on women’s imprisonment developed at the end of the twentieth century are unlikely to receive effective implementation in the twenty-first.

*Pat Carlen is Professor of Sociology at Bath University.*

**References:**

- Carlen, P. (1998) *Sledgehammer: Women’s Imprisonment at the Millennium*, London, Macmillan
- H.M. Chief Inspector of Prisons (1997) *Women in Prison: A Thematic Review*, London, Home Office

**“The prison population has reached levels unimagined at the start of the 1990s. But prison conditions are better, prisoners’ rights more respected, and the idea of rehabilitation itself rehabilitated.”**

*Stephen Shaw, Prisons Ombudsman*

## A comparison of prison occupation figures for England and Wales between 1989 and 1999

**Table (a) Prison Statistics Data for 1989**

Month/Year	No. of males in custody	No. of females in custody	Total population in custody
Jan 1989	47,402	1,785	49,187
June 1989	47,002	1,760	48,762
Dec 1989	44,281	1,637	45,918
Annual Average	46,843	1,767	48,610

**Table (b) Prison Statistics Data for 1998**

Month/Year	No. of males in custody	No. of females in custody	Total population in custody
Jan 1998	60,380	2,870	63,250
June 1998	62,610	3,120	65,727
Dec 1998	61,010	3,060	64,072
Annual Average	65,298	3,110	62,190

**Table (a):** Data produced from **Home Office** Prison Statistics, England and Wales, 1989 (Table 2.1 Population in custody by sex and type of custody, annual averages and month end figures 1984-1989).

**Table (b):** Data produced from **Home Office** Prison Statistics, England and Wales, 1998 (Table 2.1 Population in custody by sex and type of custody, annual averages and month end figures 1994-1998).

**PRISON POPULATION AS AT 10/12/99:**

Population:	65782
Population on corresponding Friday last year:	66060
Yearly Change:	-456

*Prepared by Anstey Aizlewood*