

Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment

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To be seen but not heard

To be seen but not heard,

To respect but disrespected back,

'What's your name Miss? Can you tell me your number?'

'Where's your ID card? Do you live here? What spur?'

To be seen but not heard,

To be challenged but not answer back.

'We're going to do a full search, have you got anything on you that you shouldn't have?'

Stand here miss, that's it take your top off, remove your bra.

Now the bottom half, yes, your knickers as well.

Show the soles of your feet, can you stand legs apart and squat.'

To be seen and not heard.

'Who's stupid? Look where you are.'

Disregarded, downgraded, seen as nothing more than a number,

Not a person, not even a human.

A prisoner name, number.

Treated unfair, unjust

Nothing more, nothing less.

'What's your name? What's your number?'

'You know my name and you people gave me the fucking number!'

(Katie)

Introduction

Building Futures (BF) is the Prison Reform Trust's (PRT) five-year, lottery-funded programme focused on the experiences of people serving long prison sentences.¹ The rationale for the programme relates to concerns about the significant increase in the number of people serving very long prison sentences. This article focusses on the experiences of women serving long prison sentences — including life sentences, Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences and Extended Determinate Sentences (EDS) — and the impact that the sentence has had on them.

A core principle of the BF programme is collaboration with long-term prisoners. The programme aims to provide long-sentenced prisoners with a platform for self-advocacy through consultation, research, and opportunities for leadership. The programme created the 'Building Futures Network', which is now made up of over 500 individuals with direct experience of long-term imprisonment across 77 prison establishments. Members of the BF Network directly respond to and inform the policies and debates that impact them. The aim is to initiate policy change from within the system by shedding light on the true, human cost of long-term imprisonment.

The programme has also established a number of 'Building Futures Working Groups'. These groups support long-term, in-depth collaboration with prisoners. Established in eight key prison sites across the country since early 2021; the working groups meet regularly to discuss the programme's progress, identify priorities, and contribute to relevant policy developments.

Invisible Women is a key component of the BF programme and focuses on the experiences of women serving sentences of over eight years in custody. Following the publication of the first Invisible

1. See <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures/>

2. Invisible Women examines the experiences of people serving long-term sentences in women's prisons. While the vast majority of contributors identify as women, three are transgender men.

Women briefing in November 2021, BF have now developed Working Groups in HMPs Low Newton, Bronzefield, and Send and expanding the BF Network means BF now have over 60 people in women's prisons collaborating on this work.² BF have also recruited a woman with experience of a life sentence who is now in the community to further improve the focus on the experiences of long-term prisoners post-release.

What matters to women serving long-term sentences?

'Lifers just become soulless.' (Sophia)

Through facilitating monthly working groups in each of the three prisons, BF have developed an ongoing dialogue with the women about what matters to them. A combination of localised problems and more widespread issues were identified, with overlap between the issues faced by women at different establishments. Many voiced concerns about the 'invisibility' of women serving long sentences, identifying the need for more gender-specific approaches in this area:³

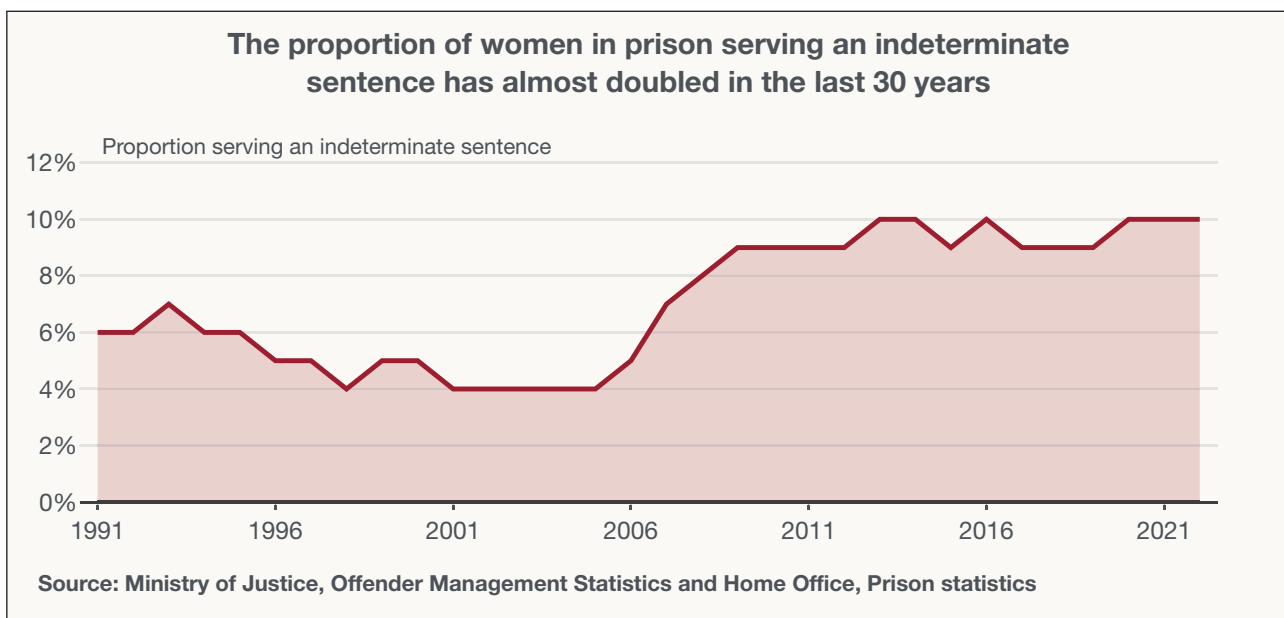
'Lifers are the grey part of the population, they're just background noise.' (Lucy)

The majority of women BF spoke to as part of this work appeared deeply aware that they are in a minority, with most of the people they live alongside serving much shorter sentences. They report feeling 'trapped and powerless' and 'tormented' and have talked extensively about having to find ways of coping with minimal support. Working group members identified significant areas that they believe are relevant to improving the experiences of people serving long sentences in women's prisons. Awareness of women's health issues, health care provision and staff-prisoner relationships have been raised time and time again as areas of concern. Overwhelmingly, the women speak of a lack of hope: the sentences they are serving are so long that they struggle to envisage a life outside of prison.⁴ The ways prisons can foster hope amongst this population has been a topic of conversation throughout this work.

These women want to be part of the solution. They want to take an active role in creating solutions to the problems they identify, even if not for themselves, then for those who will come after them.

The context

As noted in the first Invisible Women briefing, more women than ever are being sentenced to serve indeterminate sentences. In the last thirty years, the number of women serving an indeterminate sentence has grown from 96 in 1991, to 370 in June 2022.⁵



3. Zehr (1996) referred to women serving life sentences as 'an invisible entity': Zehr, H. (1996). *Doing Life: Reflections of Men and Women serving Life Sentences*. Good Books.
 4. This links to our Building Futures primary research, which will explore hope and meaning amongst long-sentenced prisoners. This work is currently going through ethical clearance.
 5. Table 1.9a. Ministry of Justice. (2022). *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2022*. and Table 5.1. Home Office. (2003). *Prison statistics England and Wales 2001*.

As of December 2022, there were a total of 40 women in custody serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. This includes 12 women who have never been released and a further 28 women who had been recalled.⁶

Most of the women we are working with are serving some form of indeterminate sentence (mainly IPP and life sentences), meaning their release will depend on meeting the requirements of the Parole Board. All indeterminately sentenced prisoners are given a tariff, indicating the minimum number of years they must serve in custody before release can be considered. Despite the IPP sentence being abolished in 2012, there are still nearly 3000 people in prison on this sentence.⁷ Nearly all (97 per cent) of IPP prisoners still in prison have passed their tariff expiry date and, in 608 cases, people have been in prison for more than a decade beyond their original tariff expiry date.⁸ In September 2022, the Justice Select Committee published a report of its inquiry on IPP sentences. Its main recommendation was for the government to establish an expert committee to consider options for resentencing people serving IPP sentences.⁹ The government has since responded to the committee's report and has rejected this recommendation.¹⁰ The establishment of an expert committee would have provided an opportunity to begin a process that could have addressed the many practical complexities related to resentencing that the committee acknowledged. The government's blanket refusal to do so is incredibly disappointing. Pressure organisations (including the Prison Reform Trust and UNGRIPP) will continue to advocate to persuade a future justice secretary of the need for a better response to the committee's proposals.¹¹

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Additionally, recent research has shown that at least 109 women were given long or life sentences under joint enterprise laws despite often being marginal to the violent event, not being at the scene or, in the majority of cases, never having engaged in any physical violence, the effect of which is discussed in previous research.¹²

The pains of long and indeterminate sentences

During our discussions in the working groups, three main aspects of long-term imprisonment were identified which relate to the specific pains of indeterminate imprisonment. These areas are uncertainty, distance from home and illegitimacy.

Uncertainty

For many people, the very nature of indeterminate sentences brings distress and frustration. Research has documented that the psychologically damaging nature of indeterminate sentences can leave prisoners in a 'fog of uncertainty about the basic terms of their captivity'.¹³ Not having a set release date means many live in a heightened level of anxiety for much of their time in prison, unable to plan for the future or envision their release.¹⁴ Women serving IPP sentences have noted

the pains of indeterminate imprisonment create a sense of hopelessness, injustice and unfairness.¹⁵ The women in the working groups echoed some of these worries, discussing the stress and frustration of not having a set release date:

'People deserve to be punished but I believe the sentences are far too high especially if you haven't even had a caution before. I don't

6. Table 1.9a. Ministry of Justice. (2022). *Offender management statistics quarterly*: April to June 2022.

7. See footnote 6.

8. Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Prison: The Facts*.

9. Justice Committee. (2022). *IPP Sentences*. (HC 2022-23)

10. Justice Committee. (2023). *IPP sentences: Government and Parole Board Responses to the Committee's Third Report*.

11. For more information see <https://www.ungripp.com/post/raab-fails-to-deliver-justice-on-ipp-a-cowardly-and-ineffectual-act> and <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/prt-comment-governments-response-to-ipp-sentence-report-wholly-inadequate/>

12. Clarke, B., & Chadwick, K. (2020). *Stories of Injustice: The criminalisation of women convicted under joint enterprise laws*. Manchester Metropolitan University.

13. Crewe, B. (2011). *Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment*. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509–529.

14. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the Tide: Adapting to Long-Term Imprisonment. *Justice Quarterly*, 34(3), 517–541.

15. Smart, S. (2018). *Too many bends in the tunnel? Women serving Indeterminate Sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection – what are the barriers to risk reduction, release and resettlement?* The Griffins Society.

even know how long I'll be in prison; they could just keep me here forever.' (Alice)

Distance from home

The struggle of maintaining contact with children is one of the most distressing elements of long-term imprisonment for women.¹⁶ Previous research has identified that the loss of contact with family and friends affects women serving life sentences more than their male counterparts, primarily because women have far more limited support networks.¹⁷ In practical terms, women are often held far away from their home towns, with a significant number being held more than 100 miles from home.¹⁸ The pains of being separated from family and children are exacerbated by the indefinite length of time they will be held in prison, with no set date when they will be able to return home to their loved ones. The damage to family relationships was often discussed by the women:

'I don't even know my family. My niece only knows me as a voice at the end of the phone. She keeps asking when I'm coming to see her, I just keep saying 'soon'.' (Katie)

Legitimacy

A number of those BF are working with were convicted under joint enterprise.¹⁹ These women talk about additional issues surrounding the legitimacy of their conviction and sentence. This experience has been noted in previous research, particularly in relation to women who were in abusive or coercive relationships with male co-defendants and therefore felt unable to intervene when the offence took place.²⁰ In cases such as this, women often see their sentences as illegitimate.²¹ This was discussed in the working groups, with the women noting that being labelled as someone who has committed murder was particularly hard to bear.

'My kids are victims; my mum's a victim and I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time.' (Amy)

'I am 20 years old, and I have been in prison since I was 18. I got convicted of murder on the basis of Joint Enterprise, together with my ex-boyfriend. I was not at the scene when the incident took place, and I was only 17. However, I am now serving a 16-year life tariff.' (Demi)

Demi spoke of this as a 'repeated trauma'. As a woman with a history of abuse and trauma, being convicted of a murder she did not physically commit and exposed to the prison environment from such a young age has caused extreme distress:

'When I first got found guilty, I didn't come out of my cell for 4 months unless it was to shower or eat. Instead, I spent my time self-harming, writing suicide letters and planning ways in which I could kill myself... My mental health was severely damaged. I was surrounded by loud noises, fights, violence, other women's trauma, self-harm and disgusting conditions. I started wondering...whether I'd ever be able to find someone to love me whilst being labelled a murderer; whether I'd get ill or get a deadly disease and die in prison...or whether I'd be able to just get on with it and accept I'd have to spend half of my life in prison or just kill myself in order to avoid being a burden on my family and escape the uncertainty and further trauma awaiting me.' (Demi)

Hope

'It will be truly tragic if our hope for living goes. Every day feels like a fight to keep that hope going.' (Sophia)

Overwhelmingly, conversations in the working groups centred on the ability to maintain a sense of hope despite the circumstances they are faced with. The sheer length of these sentences means that large portions of

16. See Prison Reform Trust. (2021). *Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment*.

17. See footnote 14.

18. Lord Farmer. (2019). *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Ministry of Justice.

19. Joint enterprise (JE) is a set of legal principles grounded in common law and originating from Victorian times, allowing for the collective punishment of multiple defendants for a single offence.

20. Hulley, S., Crewe, B. & Wright, S. (2019) Making Sense of 'Joint Enterprise' for Murder: Legal legitimacy or instrumental acquiescence. *British Journal of Criminology*, 59, 1328–1346.

21. Hulley, S. (2021) 'Defending 'Co-offending' Women: Recognising Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control in 'Joint Enterprise' Cases Involving Women and their Intimate Partners.' *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 60(4), 580–603.

women's lives will be spent in prison, away from their loved ones. Many feel 'lost in the wilderness' (Barbara) and are conscious that 'the support network you have at the start, you're very unlikely to have at the end or even in the middle' (Alice).

As noted in the recent Building Futures progression consultation (which focuses on the experiences of male prisoners), protracted periods of 'nothing time' seem to characterise long-term imprisonment for many.²² BF have heard that this can also be the case for those serving long sentences in the women's estate. Hope seems to be inextricably linked with one's ability to plan for the future. When progression is lacking, hope for the future can quickly dissipate.

'My experience of prison is that you are not progressing with a long sentence, you are existing where every day is very much the same. I have my family outside who are serving a sentence of their own missing me. I also think of the victim's family too who have lost a loved one.' (Alice)

Rather than actively working towards progression or release, some of the women feel unable to maintain hope, with many living the sentence day-by-day and avoiding reminders of what they have lost:

'There is nothing in here for me. It's about survival.' (Sophia)

Health

'I feel like I'm being punished for my poor health' (Amira)

The ambition of the National Prison Healthcare Board (2019) is that prison health care is equivalent to the health care people in the general population receive.²³ In practice however, issues with overcrowding, staffing, funding and the prioritisation of the security function impacts health care delivery in prison.²⁴ Many women enter prison in poor health and, in comparison to men, disclose significantly more mental health needs.²⁵ In 2017, the Independent Advisory Panel on

Deaths in Custody noted that a reduction in staffing levels was a significant factor in the rise in deaths of women in prison. In recent years, the Covid-19 lockdowns have exacerbated existing problems within prisons, increasing the damage prison causes to women's health and well-being due to restrictions in access to physical and mental health services.²⁶

In comparison to our work with people serving long sentences in men's prisons, concerns about physical and mental health were raised much more often by the women. Many suggested that prison health care is insufficient and lacking. Concerns about diet, access to exercise, proper health care services, and the potential for long-term health problems to go untreated mean many spend a lot of time worrying about their health. The women recognise that the fact they are exposed to insufficient health care facilities for such extensive lengths of time means their concerns are felt more acutely.

'We are imprisoned as punishment. Our liberty is taken as the form of punishment. I don't remember the judge saying 'oh and by the time you leave you will either be morbidly obese, suffering serious health problems, osteoporosis, diabetes or a combination of some or all due to the appalling diet you will be forced to eat'!' (Amelia)

'Short-termers may have health problems, but they know they're going home — they can get help when they get out. We are stuck and left to deal with it by ourselves.' (Amira)

Additionally, some women suggested there is not enough recognition of the link between physical and mental health, particularly in relation to the stress and anxiety caused by physical health problems:

'They don't see the link between physical health and mental health. They were asking me stuff about my childhood and that wasn't the problem. I know my physical health problems are having a psychological impact.' (Amira)

As this quote demonstrates, there seems to be a lack of joined-up care between health care and mental

22. Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Making Progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences.*

23. National Prison Healthcare Board. (2019). *National Prison Healthcare Board Principle of Equivalence of Care for Prison Healthcare in England.*

24. Nuffield Trust. (2021). *How Prison Healthcare in England Works.*

25. Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody. (2017). *Preventing the Deaths of Women in Prison – initial results of a rapid information gathering exercise by the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody.* https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_74854-8_0.pdf

26. Howard League for Penal Reform. (2022). *Inquiry into women's health and well-being in prisons.*

health services. Many noted that worsening physical health is closely linked with declining mental health. This is particularly the case for those facing many more years in custody, as their ability to progress and actively engage in the risk reduction process (including offending behaviour programmes and psychological interventions) may be hampered by poor health.

'They just don't care. It's like they are quickening my death.' (Mandy)

Linked to this are concerns that staff fail to take their health problems seriously. Mandy also felt she had to 'beg staff to have a bit of compassion' and others were fearful that their poor health would only worsen during the sentence:

'I asked a nurse where her compassion is, the nurse responded 'this is why I am this side of the hatch and you are the other'.' (Sophia)

'I've come to the conclusion that because my diabetes is not monitored properly, I will probably lose a limb in prison. I came in when I was teenager, how do you think that makes me feel?' (Amira)

For those women with serious health concerns, the constant worrying about health issues felt like a secondary form of punishment. A large proportion of the women had real concerns about whether they would be healthy, able-bodied, or still be alive by the time they are due to be released.

'My biggest fear is that I will die in prison.' (Amira)

Women's health problems

As a result of the length of time they will spend in prison, the women are also concerned about their reproductive health, particularly in relation to cervical screening and menopause. A number of the women BF

noted they had not had appointments for cervical screening or breast examinations, with one woman telling us she only had an examination after repeatedly pursuing the issue herself at appointments with the doctor.

'I've been in for nearly 8 years and I've never had a smear test.' (Ava)

In recent years, conversations surrounding reproductive health — in particular cervical screening and menopause support — have arisen in public discourse, with a large number of businesses introducing education and support resources for the first time.²⁷ This does not seem to be the experience of

the women we have spoken to; the majority were still struggling to access appropriate and effective support while in prison.²⁸

'Many of the young girls in here don't know what a smear test is. They need support and guidance, especially when they will be here for a long time.' (Ava)

'Access to information around age-related medical conditions, such as menopause...osteoporosis.' (Amelia)

In 2018 Public Health England put forward gender specific standards for women in custody, in relation to improving health and wellbeing. A number of the recommendations are aimed at improving the experiences of women going through menopause while in custody, including proper access to hormone therapy treatment, physical activity that is focused on strengthening bones and sharing information regarding lifestyle choices to improve symptoms.²⁹ Using Mandy's example below, it seems that support for these issues is still lacking:

'They sent round some information about the symptoms of menopause, I've got every single one. I've been asking for support for 6 months, I've just heard nothing.' (Mandy)

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27. In June 2022, the Civil Service became the largest organisation to sign the Menopause Workplace pledge:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/civil-service-becomes-largest-organisation-to-sign-menopause-workplace-pledge>

28. The Bangkok Rules: Rule 18. "Preventive health-care measures of particular relevance to women, such as Papanicolaou tests and screening for breast and gynaecological cancer, shall be offered to women prisoners on an equal basis with women of the same age in the community". https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_22032015.pdf

29. Public Health England. (2018). *Gender Specific Standards to Improve Health and Wellbeing for Women in Prison in England*.

The women spoke of staff not knowing how to support them. This relates to gender-specific language and treatment, which can be an issue when staff have transferred to women's sites having worked in the male estate for a number of years. One male officer, when overhearing a discussion amongst the group about menopause noted that he 'just doesn't think about this stuff'. One of the women in the group responded by saying 'in all seriousness, that is probably because you are a man.'

'We're a female establishment, they just don't do enough in terms of female provision. Sometimes knowledge is power.' (Naomi)

Staff-prisoner relationships

Each of the working groups noted the power staff have in defining their experiences of long-term imprisonment. If staff are motivated, caring and understanding, prisoners feel supported and able to approach staff with any issues they have. If staff are dismissive or rude, prisoners are much less likely to want to engage:

'I always ask what made [a new officer] want to work here. They often shrug and say, 'I don't know' or 'to pay the bills', and I just think 'wrong answer mate.' (Maggie)

Many could give examples of individual members of staff showing care and compassion in times of need, but most conversations surrounding staff focused on officers not understanding the specific pains of long-term imprisonment. Dehumanising language was regularly raised as an issue, with one woman noting 'that's the problem with prison, they forget we're human' (Barbara) and another saying, 'I've heard comments like 'it's time to let the animals out' (Abi). When staff speak this way, it reinforces feelings of helplessness.

There were also some examples of staff — male staff in particular — exploiting their power. As noted by Demi, sometimes treatment lacks respect and dignity.

'Going through the prison system after being failed severely by the care system is a repeated

trauma. I'm now 20 years old, and I have served 2 ½ years. I'm now in a place where I get stripped of my dignity on a daily basis, a place where male officers take advantage of their power and think it's okay to flirt with you or perv on you, a place where the only escape is drugs and self-harm, a place where there's no privacy, no structure or consistency, and a place where we are being degraded and humiliated.' (Demi)

There have been discussions around how staff can encourage good behaviour, and when staff exhibit unfair or discriminatory behaviour, it only adds to the broader sense of injustice. Group members expressed how they can learn behaviours from staff in both positive and negative ways:

'If we see you acting correctly, we're going to follow that. If we see you acting aggressively, how are we ever going to change?' (Abi)

'There's obviously banter with staff — and sometimes that is nice — but often they take it too far. I asked them to stop and they won't...they keep going until I'm in tears. The rules and boundaries definitely only go one way.' (Amber)

Some behaviour from staff seems to directly oppose what women serving long sentences are learning in offending behaviour programmes, particularly in relation to proper communication and respect. This is relevant for those who are doing courses aimed at them finding a voice to speak up for themselves in constructive and respectful ways.

'We're told we have to do these courses to help us find our voice and then officers just try to diminish us.' (Amira)

'I've heard them say 'they're residents, they're going to lie.' (Naomi)

'They've got this monstrous power...we are vulnerable.' (Sophia)

Some behaviour from staff seems to directly oppose what women serving long sentences are learning in offending behaviour programmes, particularly in relation to proper communication and respect.

Many women referred to a lack of targeted support from staff in their times of need. They noted that staff often fail to recognise the unique difficulties faced by those serving long, indeterminate sentences. The majority suggested targeted training for staff would be of huge benefit. Some staff fail to understand the impact of these sentences, with many at a loss in terms of how to provide support. This seems to be felt most acutely amongst those convicted under Joint Enterprise and those who are maintaining innocence:

'One officer said to me: 'even if you did say you were guilty, I wouldn't know what to do with you'.' (Barbara)

'I'm working on being violent when I've got no history of violence...but listening to other people talk about [their violence] is trauma. I have no support.' (Amy)

BF have seen that the implementation of the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model varies across the women's estate.³⁰ An integral part of the OMiC model is the keyworker scheme, which assigns a prison officer to each prisoner to offer guidance and support throughout their sentence.³¹ Contact with keyworkers varies amongst the women we have spoken to, with some seeing their keyworkers weekly and others not even knowing who their keyworker is. Those earlier in their sentence tended to speak more positively about the keyworker scheme, with examples of holistic support through the early days of their sentence. Others, particularly those further along the sentence, have seen no benefit from the implementation of the keyworker scheme:

'This is when I need a keyworker most. I'm currently hanging by a thread and I have no one to talk to.' (Abi)

'I don't see OMiC or my keyworker because I don't kick up a fuss. I'm used to being left out by now.' (Amber)

For those serving such long sentences, when staff fail to make an effort to get to know the prisoners they are working with, it can make their imprisonment more distressing.

What can be done?

Some of the women were keen to identify potential solutions to some of these problems, which primarily focused on finding ways to spend their time more constructively.³² Having a reason to get up in the morning or having something to look forward to is key:

'A lot of time that you spend in there is just seen as you [are] treading water, but for anyone it also has to be purposeful or what's the point in getting up in the morning.' (Lucy)

'Let us do something purposeful so we can pay our way in society rather than society paying for us.' (Mary)

Activities that were able to offer something out of the ordinary, create a sense of personal development, or improve links with family were crucial. One resident in Bronzefield told us about helping to develop a creative therapy group, which aims to help residents feel proud of

themselves through painting, poetry, music, and other artwork.

'If you can go somewhere and do something in this place and feel proud, that's where the hope is.' (Alex)

These activities helped them and others to cope with their sentence and foster a sense of hope. One woman spent time working in the gardens in prison and felt that this opportunity was integral to her coping with the sentence:

'I found purpose in work in the gardens, it was like there was healing in the soil.' (Lucy)

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30. Ministry of Justice & HMPPS. (2018). *Manage the Custodial Sentence Policy Framework*.

31. Prison Reform Trust. (2018). *Offender Management in Custody (OMiC)*.

32. The majority of purposeful activity in women's prisons is tailored towards women serving short sentences, meaning provision for those serving long sentences is lacking. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2020). *Annual Report 2019–20*.

Additionally, a number of working group members said an opportunity to share guidance and advice with people entering custody on a long sentence would be beneficial, noting that this type of peer support is lacking.

'[We could be] coming back into prisons as mentors for others, going to schools and children's homes to talk to those that could end up in prison. Support centres for those who may find themselves struggling.' (Mary)

'Let us do something purposeful so we can pay our way in society rather than society paying for us.' (Mary)

The desire to feel they were giving something back felt important both in respect to helping others and in creating a sense of purpose. The women were acutely aware of the length of time they are going to be in prison, but many suggest being involved in rewarding activities can make a significant difference in how they cope with their sentences.

Conclusion

The experiences of women involved in this programme highlight the need for more gender-specific provision for women serving long sentences. The women felt their pains of long-term imprisonment were not fully understood by prison staff, governors, and the wider prison system.

Three key themes; hope, health and staff relationships were dominant. Many of the women were anxious about their health, particularly in relation to how exposure to prison environments for such long periods of time impacted their physical, mental, and emotional health. Specific concerns relating to reproductive health indicated that not enough is being done to support women who go through physiological changes during their sentence.

The majority of the issues highlighted by the women could be improved through more staff training,

focussing on working with those serving long sentences. Involving long-sentenced women in drafting what this training might look like seems to be an obvious opportunity.

From working with the women to identify the issues that matter most to them, BF have made recommendations to policymakers in the hope of improving the experiences of women serving long sentences below.

Recommendations

1. HMPPS should produce training tools for all staff working with long-term prisoners in women's prisons. Women with direct experience of long-term imprisonment should be consulted with throughout the production.
2. HMPPS should adhere to expectations set out by Public Health England in their 'Gender specific standards for health and wellbeing for women in prison in England'. Particular attention should be given to Standard 1.9 in relation to offering all eligible women screening and health checks within the appropriate interval.
3. The National Women's Prisons Health and Social Care Review should recognise the specific experiences of all women in prison, including long-sentenced women.
4. Prison governors should prioritise women specific health issues and, where possible, should involve women in developing resources.
5. Prisons should provide meaningful opportunities for women further along their sentence to support those entering custody. For instance, through a properly implemented peer support system.
6. Prison governors should facilitate regular groups with long-sentenced prisoners for example 'lifer groups'. These groups should be a forum where women can raise issues relating to their experience and discuss possible prison specific solutions.