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**Where does the prison
system go from here?**

Special Edition

Interview: Rachel Halford

Rachel Halford has been the Director of Women in Prison since July 2010. She is interviewed by Karen Harrison who is a Lecturer in Law, University of Hull.

Rachel Halford is the Director of Women in Prison and has held this post since July 2010. Rachel worked as the Resettlements Service Manager for four years before becoming the Director. Women in Prison was founded in 1983 by a former prisoner, Chris Tchaikovsky, and works to reduce the number of women in prison and limit the damage which prison can cause to women's lives. It does this by supporting individual women and by campaigning for gender equality in criminal justice policy and practice. It is a national organisation which works with over 2,000 women each year. Services include providing advice and guidance for women whilst they are in prison, and extend to through the gate support. This includes practical support such as finding housing, reuniting women with their children and helping to source education and employment. They also work to empower women who have experience of the criminal justice system to get involved and campaign for change. More information about the organisation can be found at www.womeninprison.org.uk

KH: How do you regard our relatively high national imprisonment rate?

RH: For women it doesn't need to be that high. There are approximately 4,200 women in prison at the moment, and of those only about 1,200 need to be there. We estimate there are about 80 women prisoners who will probably never leave prison and there are about 1,000 women there for public safety and rehabilitation; but the rest don't need to be there and their sentences could be addressed differently within a community setting. A huge number of women are in prison for minor offences and pose no risk to the public.

KH: How likely do you think it is that this rate will be reduced? How desirable do you think this is?

RH: There has been a big push to reduce the number of women in prison. The Ministry of Justice funding, £15.6 million, which came off the back of the Corston Report, has been put into women's centres with a focus on supporting alternatives to custody. In theory we should see a reduction in the number of women who receive custodial sentences and are remanded, and perhaps more women who

are bailed, but that is all in theory. The likelihood will depend on what happens with the spending review. There is a massive cut for the Ministry of Justice. There has been a suggestion that there will be less prison spaces and a possible closure of some prisons, but on the basis that there are no empty prisons it is hard to see which ones they will close. The cuts will effect probation staff and prison resources and this will have an impact on the running of prisons. The Corston money was all about reducing the number of women in prisons; it would be our hope in the long term that we would see a large reduction in the numbers of women in prison, but whether we will actually see this, who knows.

KH: Is Britain a broken society and to what degree do you think prisons can contribute towards addressing social problems such as poverty, unemployment, family breakdown and anti-social behaviour?

RH: To an extent yes, I believe that it is. There is a real imbalance between poverty and the money structure within our society and with the new cuts it will be even bigger. There is no middle ground anymore. With regards to the criminal justice system, people have no chance to change their lives and consequently they end up on the revolving door of the criminal justice system. There is an intergenerational impact with families, for example women from a low income family may resort to petty crime such as shoplifting in order to make ends meet — she might then receive a custodial sentence and subsequently her children could be placed in care and she could lose her home. For these children there is often no chance for them to get out of care. Without resources put into addressing the root causes of poverty this kind of family will never be given the chance to change. If they didn't send women to prison then many of these social problems wouldn't exist for their families and the government would save a lot of money. Women on longer sentences may find support with education and employment — but this help could be provided in the community, where we would then be in a position to address some of the root causes of offending. It costs £53,000 per year to send a woman to prison if she hasn't got children. If she has got children then this can rise to £70-80,000 per year. Alternatives in the community cost about an eighth of this, the money saved could

be used to address some of the root causes of offending. Public perception of offenders also affects this — the government wants to stay in power and so I have huge concerns as to whether anything will drastically change.

KH: To what degree do you think it will be possible to achieve a 'rehabilitation revolution', significantly reducing reoffending, given the current squeeze on resources?

RH: We have the sentencing review to come, and in order for anything to change it will need to come from the top down. If that doesn't happen there will be no rehabilitation revolution. Our biggest concern is whether within it, there will be gender specific elements. You can't have a revolution which is generic because men and women have different needs. It sounds good at the moment, but I have to say I don't have a lot of faith. There is someone coming in who has something new to say and perhaps this will lead to fewer women being remanded and more alternatives in the community. The Liberals said in their manifesto that there would be no sentences under six months but where did that go? The other issue is, bearing in mind the cuts, whether there are the necessary resources for this revolution to go forward? And how do they convince the public? My hope is that Kenneth Clarke will come in with something quite radical.

We need gender specific services. We need risk assessment tools and programmes which have been designed for women specifically. The only current example of this is the CARE programme which has recently been accredited for women. This works using narrative therapy but importantly Women in Prison are involved as mentor/advocates and work with the women for up to two years. A concentration on through the gate services which has helped to make this programme effective. At the moment of the 28 women involved in the programme, two have been recalled for breach of their license conditions, but none have re-offended. This is a massive achievement.

KH: How do you think that the actual prisoner experience has shifted in recent years? How is it likely to change in the next few years?

There is more emphasis on women specific services, prison and probation staff now have training on how to work with women offenders and there is recognition of differences, but there are no dramatic changes.

RH: I don't know that it has. Since I started working for Women in Prison, there are perhaps more services available with more voluntary agencies being allowed to work with the women in prison, so accessibility to services has got better, but feedback from the women would suggest that fundamentally not a lot has changed. There is more emphasis on women specific services, prison and probation staff now have training on how to work with women offenders and there is recognition of differences, but there are no dramatic changes. Some lifers say it is more difficult for them, regarding different restrictions. There is more emphasis on education and employment when women leave prison, but this does depend on what type of sentence we are talking about as women receiving shorter sentences are unable to access this support. We have seen some positive changes in the responses to the voluntary sector working in prisons, but how it will change in the future I am unsure. There has been a real enthusiasm for looking at women in the criminal justice system, and as an organisation, in lobbying capacity it has been great that this has been on the agenda because of the Corston report. The funding made available because of the Corston report, which we received some of, fed into community projects and that has been fantastic, but when that funding comes to an end we do not yet know

whether we will be able to sustain this work.

KH: What do you regard as the biggest problems in the women's prison system?

RH: The fact that women are still there when they don't need to be there — that is the biggest problem. If we accept that these women are there, on a day to day basis it is the lack of resources and the fact that there are still male prison officers working in women's prisons. If you look at recent prison reports, for example the Holloway report, there are still numerous women reporting that they have been sexual advanced or assaulted. There needs to be recognition that women's needs are different. This needs to be fed through, so all women's prisons are staffed by women. This might sound radical or dramatic but if we are to make a difference and if we want to ensure that women are not intimidated, as many women come from backgrounds of domestic

violence and sexual violence, it is necessary. The key things are resources and women staff. One good thing is the links that prisons are now making with voluntary agencies, it is moving in a really good way.

KH: What are the major obstacles to prison reform?

RH: The initial cost and public perception are the biggest obstacles. The public needs to be educated. They need to look at the issues, look at what these women go through, look at the root causes and realise they are not what the public perceive them to be. They only see the horror cases like Baby P, the stories which sell newspapers stories. They don't see the stories of the other 3,750 women in prison. So it is about education. The biggest difficulty is definitely public perception.

KH: How do you see the idea of 'The Big Society' impacting on prison?

RH: We are waiting for it to play out. At the moment we are ideally all going to work together, but there is a lack of funding in the statutory sector. I haven't quite got my head around where all of this money is going to come from in the 'big society'. Who is going to control the money? Is there more money available for the voluntary sector or will it be the statutory sector that will control it? It is strange that statutory organisations now need us, this makes us popular and that is good but we are concerned about the conditions that might be attached to this. Personally, I think the vision is a bit of a cop out — let's get lots of volunteers to do the work. There is a lack of commitment. Cameron says it's a big society and we should work together, but if we consider the cuts which will affect young people, and those on low income, does he really think that we will all be happy volunteering together? In light of the cuts and without further information it feels as if the big society is about patronising us. It feels really controlling.

KH: Are there ways in which the charitable sector and citizens can make a new and different contribution to prisons and rehabilitation?

RH: We make a really valuable contribution at present. If we can continue with this, it's about partnership — working with statutory services and bringing it back to the women who we work with and who we work for, to be able to provide the best possible service which we can and a platform for their

voices. It's about finances to enable us to maintain and increase what we are doing.

KH: Prisons have an extensive system of managerial monitoring and regulation including key performance targets, audits, inspection and surveys of staff and prisoners. Is this affordable or necessary? Should prisons be the subject of deregulation?

RH: There is an impact on us. Because prison and probation resources are so limited and they have this mass of targets it becomes more difficult for them to work with us because it is more work for them. Despite this, they do work with us and in some prisons we have great relations, but to establish this has often taken time because they are worried about what more work they will need to do. They are put under immense pressure to achieve outcomes with small amounts of resources. It can also affect our outcomes.

KH: What role should the commercial sector have in imprisonment?

RH: I find it very bizarre that a commercial company would want to make money on imprisoning people. It doesn't sit comfortably with me at all. What happens if it becomes payment by results? We are looking at what is going to happen with local health authorities and payment by results, for example with mental health care. We work with women in HMP Peterborough

and HMP Bronzefield we have great relations with the prison and great access and we are able to provide women with some really great services. But I don't agree with the possibility of the commercial sector becoming so dominant.

KH: To what extent do you think private sector competition has altered the terrain of imprisonment?

RH: I don't know that it has in the women's estate because it has taken them a long time to come up with anything that matches what was being offered by HM Prison Service. The staff they employed were not always trained as well as those from HM Prison Service. It may be different now, but when they were set up it was appalling, especially for the men who had no experience of working with women — for example a man who was previously a security guard who was working with women, it is all about control and he has no idea about the needs of

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women. It is frightening. He has no idea about what they have been through.

KH: How do you think prison work in prisons is likely to develop?

RH: If the rehabilitation revolution comes into play and everyone has to go to work then industry are going to be very pleased with the cheap labour. Women can and do work for the whole day if they chose to and there is provision for them to work. Kenneth Clarke recently said that their wage would only increase from £7 to £20 per week, as part of the rehabilitation revolution, and that every prisoner would work. Perhaps this was said to change public perception — look at what the offenders are giving back. He could be politically paving the way for something else. The public may see that offenders are feeding something back into the economy and that they are being paid a little bit of money; but this isn't good for the women involved. It is like a labour camp. We need more work projects where women get paid properly and pay tax. The money they currently receive is an insult and is degrading; it is like child pocket money. Also for many women in prison it just reinforces their belief that they are worthless. I can see where they are coming from and why they are doing it but it will have an appalling effect on women.

KH: How can Women in Prison get their voice heard in the current debates about prison and imprisonment? Is anyone listening?

RH: We feed into anything and everything we possibly can. We write to politicians and newspapers and we feed into any review or consultation — although I have this horrible feeling that nobody ever reads it and the decisions have already been made but we have to engage with this. As mentioned previously we have, over the last few years, had an inside track because women were on the justice agenda and as a consequence have had to do less lobbying, however this has changed and we are now actively lobbying for change. We have a service user group and it's about policymakers hearing their voices and this is really important. It's hard to know whether people listen. It's horrendous that it took a large number of deaths in custody for them to listen the

first time around when the Corston report was written, but women are still dying in prison. We know that it takes something drastic and sad to happen before women are listened too. With the current cuts this will make everything even harder.

KH: What progress do you think has been made since the Corston Report?

RH: There has been the money, which has been fantastic. This is money which has gone into alternatives to custody. We were lucky to secure two grants. It has given us the chance to evidence that there are alternatives to custody for women. In London we work with women who are on remand, on short sentences or on license, they are the hardest group to engage. We have worked with more than 2,000 women this year, some of who are difficult to access and require an enormous amount of one-to-one work but it has been successful and it's been great that we have been given the opportunity to prove that it can be successful. There has also been more emphasis on alternatives in the community such as community payback, but Women in Prison is not about punishment and we won't be, but it is better than prison. There are a few women's centres but there are no small custodial units which Baroness Corston recommended. This appears to have been forgotten unless we need to prove that it works first. Some women's prisons are mansion houses on

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lots of land, these could be sold and money could be used to set up small units.

KH: What other areas still need to be improved in women's prisons?

RH: The obvious answer is that most women should not be there, but apart from that it is about being able to access the services which they need. It is about gender specific staff, accessibility to resources, but it's about them not being there. If any intervention needs to take place it can take place in the community. It's about women not being separated from their children. There are some mother and baby units but there are limited spaces and the process is very hard — there are lots of women who have their children taken away from them when they are born. The problem is what imprisonment perpetuates.

KH: Do you think that women may be particularly affected by the spending cuts?

RH: Most women will be affected, but particularly those on low income, where often the women who will end up in prison come from. In society, generally, women would be affected more because that is what historically happens. So the obvious answer is yes.

KH: How do you think the changes in public spending will affect the particular role of organisations such as your own?

RH: I hope that what it will do is link us up more with statutory services. At the moment we are funded by London councils for a few of our projects. Some of our projects may be stopped earlier than originally

agreed, this is a direct impact of the spending cuts. It is difficult to know how it will work but I think it will be based on more joined-up working. Going back to big society I think the statutory sector will need to work in a more joined up way with us. For example we have a pilot criminal justice project in Manchester which works with women in the courts and police custody suites, and works with the women to help them secure bail, we also support them and provide them with a tailored support plan. We also, where possible feed into the pre-sentence reports which this can lead to a woman not being remanded. We've had fantastic results in Manchester and we are now going live in London.



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