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Within these Walls: Reflections of women in and after prison

An insight into the experience of women's imprisonment in Britain and Ireland.

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A lot of people I met in prison shouldn't have been there, there was one girl, she was in for being drunk and incapable and breach of the peace, she got four months.... I thought that was barmy... there was another one, she was eight and half months pregnant, and she got twelve months for stealing a jumper from M and S—she shouldn't have got a sentence like that. (Mary)¹

Introduction

This paper, based on the authors' continuing work with women in custody in Ireland and Britain over a period of six years, poignantly reminds us of the women in our prisons and the extraordinarily punitive sanction, that imprisonment often is for such women. The Corston Report² was regarded as a revolutionary beacon of light for activists and academics working in the field of women's imprisonment. Baroness Corston, in a powerful way, drew the attention of the British government to the plight of women in prison, to the injustice of adding criminal sanctions to social disadvantage for some of the most vulnerable in society. The report enlivened activists, sparking ideas and opening up new possibilities regarding radical change for women in criminal justice systems. The question now, Eleven years on, is whether all that promise was realised. By way of a contribution to answering that question, this article reflects on the reality of women's imprisonment in Britain and Ireland today.

Currently, there are about 4,588 women in prison in Britain and Ireland, and about 90,497 men. Women constitute a very small minority in our prisons, about 5 per cent of the prison population of Britain and Ireland, and many women have committed only minor offences.³ Many of the issues for women are the same across each of the four prison jurisdictions of the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and England and Wales. Most come from disadvantaged backgrounds, having experienced poverty, addiction, mental ill health, and violence and abuse, often as children and adults. Women entering prison therefore often have very complex needs.

The gendered ideologies that influence what we think about how women *should* think and feel and behave, form part of a societal superstructure in which family and home are still deemed appropriate preoccupations for women.⁴ Many women in prison enthusiastically embrace and actively pursue idealised notions of family and home, despite experiences of a frequently harsh reality. This paper reflects on women's experiences of prison. The paper provides insight into the nature of the women's lived experiences and aspirations and contrasts this with the stark reality and cruelty of their experiences of (criminal) 'justice'. While a great deal has certainly been accomplished regarding women's (positive) experiences in prison, there is still much to do.

Women and Prison

Getting sent down was a shock to me, especially pregnant ... I was naïve ... I didn't think you could get prison on a 1st offence ...

1. Cited in Padel, U. & Stevenson, P. (1988) *Insiders: Women's Experiences of Prison*, London: Virago. 136.
2. Corston, J. (2011) *Women in the Penal System: Second Report on Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. London: Howard League for Penal Reform.
3. Prison Reform Trust UK <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/>, Irish Penal Reform Trust, <http://www.iprt.ie/>
4. Oakley, A. (1985) [1974]. *The Sociology of Housework*. Oxford New York, New York: Basil Blackwell.

I really didn't but loads of us were first timers for stupid stuff like shoplifting and breach, lots of breaches ... some hadn't even got prison first time round but missed appointments or couldn't pay their fines... and so we all ended up chucked in there... in hell. (Kady)⁵

There are many stories like the one behind the quote above; stories of women's lives being ripped apart by a prison sentence, and women being sentenced to prison for very minor offences.⁶ The opening quote in this paper is from 1988, the quote above, from 2016, highlighting consistently depressing issues. Sharpe⁷ refers to a young pregnant mum sentenced to six months in custody for shoplifting goods worth only five pounds with a child under five at home, sentenced, on the day her second baby was due to be born. These examples illustrate the extraordinarily punitive nature of the criminal justice system in relation to women. The early work of Quakers and others in the 1800's, who campaigned for changes in penal responses to women, has been echoed over the last thirty years by increasing calls for changes in the way women are responded to in the criminal justice system.⁸ In 2007 the Corston Report re-emphasised the need for positive change. Corston suggested that women were immediately disadvantaged in the criminal justice system (CJS) simply by their gender: the CJS being designed by men and for the most part for men. Corston made 43 recommendations covering all aspects of women's' experience in the CJS. The proposed changes if implemented were to recognise and address the different ways women might experience and respond to the criminal justice system and to show understanding and appreciation of women's pathways into (and out of) offending. Corston's strongest message, however, was that fewer women should 'end up' in custody in the first place.

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Keeping women out of custody was to be achieved, wherever possible, by sentencing women to community-based sanctions whilst utilising a range of community-based small-scale resources designed to meet the specific needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system. These resources would be staffed by professionals and 'experts by experience' who would work together in small well-resourced units offering women compassion, understanding and informed and proven and/or innovative pathways away from offending. There are excellent examples of such resources that have worked successfully with women to assist them in their escape from the CJS, enabling them to forge pathways to desistance. Examples include the 218 Service in Glasgow, Anawim Women's Centre in Birmingham, the Asha Women's Centre in Worcester, the Farida Women's Centre in Oldham, the Inspire Project in Belfast⁹ and the Coolmine Project in Dublin. These projects, and others like them, support women affected by the criminal justice system in effecting positive change for themselves and their families. These projects provide support to and for women enabling positive change in relation to desistance, and more broadly in their lives. One woman having attended such a centre summed up its value for her:

This place saved me; they listen, they listen, they understand, they don't write me off as a failure ...I couldn't see a way out. I honestly don't know where I'd be without this place—well I do ...dead. (Tricia)¹⁰

Sadly, the economic landscape is challenging for women's centres, particularly post Transforming Rehabilitation (TR).¹¹ Some centres have closed altogether or no longer engage in the CJS aspect of their previous work; some face funding and financial issues that seriously affect their ability to continue to support women as fully as they would like. 'Payment by

5. Baldwin, L. *Ongoing Doctoral Research; Motherhood Challenged: A study exploring the emotional impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and emotion*. De Montfort University. Leicester.
6. Baldwin, L. & Epstein, R. Short but not Sweet: A study of the impact of short custodial sentences on mothers and their children. Oakdale Trust and De Montfort University. Available at; <https://www.dora.dmu.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/2086/14301>
7. Sharpe, G. (2015) Precarious identities: 'Young' motherhood, desistance and stigma. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 1-16:7.
8. Carlen, P. (1983) *Women's Imprisonment: A Study in Social Control*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Carlen, P. (2002) *Women and Punishment: The Struggle for Justice*. Cullompton: Willan. McIvor, G. (2004) *Women who offend*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Worrall, A. (1990) *Offending Women*, London: Routledge.
9. See IPRT Position Paper 10, Women in the Criminal Justice System; www.iprt.ie/contents/2571
10. See also 5.
11. The Government strategy for reform and privatisation in the management of offenders. <https://consult.justice.gov.uk/transforming-rehabilitation/>

results'¹² schemes have seriously affected the way women are and can be supported. Not least because of a lack of appreciation of the significance of the 'unmeasurables' which are vital to success when working with women. How do you measure the impact of *being listened to for the first time, or learning to trust someone, or feeling an increased sense or worth?*¹³ Corston called for a 'prison without walls'. It will be interesting for researchers and policy makers alike to review emerging data from the experiences of women since the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation, to consider the degree to which women's needs have been met, or even indeed accounted for post-Corston.

This paper focusses on the experiences of women who unfortunately still find themselves 'behind the walls' of our prisons. What does it 'feel' like for the 14,466 women in Britain and Ireland who are committed to prison annually? This article can't fully capture the plethora of emotions fuelled by separation from children and families, from home, and from 'normal life' by the experience of imprisonment. However, the article aims to give some sense of those emotions; by exploring the relationship that women, many of them mothers, have with their own private carceral space, that is their cell or prison room. The paper explores women's reflections through photographs, their own words, and their poetry, in their perceptions, emotions and responses to prison space.

Methodology

Photographs and poetry presented here were gathered during research undertaken by the authors, with women in prison and after their release, in Britain and Ireland. These are presented, along with the women's reflections, to give an insight into women's prison experience, and to give pause for thought about the challenge that we face in trying to bring about

positive change for women in the CJS. Baldwins', UK based research,¹⁴ focused on understanding 'more' about the impact of prison on the emotions and maternal identities of mothers who have experienced incarceration. While Quinlan's¹⁵ research focused on exploring the broader experiences of women in prison in Ireland, as well as her present work considering the experiences of women in prison in Britain and Ireland.

Some of the reflections of women in prison presented here come from interviews with women and mothers that took place post-custody and are therefore reflections reliant on memory and contain emotions that may have altered over time. Also, the varying cultural aspects and situational circumstances in the women's experiences, (for example differences in prison size/conditions) inevitably lead to differences in how women have experienced imprisonment. Despite such nuances, there are common themes in the narratives. It can be said that all the women who participated in the research projects, whether still in prison or having left, continued to be, to a greater or lesser extent immersed in their emotions and the emotional legacy of their prison experience. As feminist researchers, the authors are respectful and mindful of women's personal experiences of prison and place a high value on these, memories, perceptions and narratives presented.

Prison space and its relationship to the emotions of incarcerated women

Although prison time, as determined by the courts is clearly important, prison space becomes a critical dimension of prison experience for those imprisoned. Prison space has become an increasingly popular field of research, with several academics offering valuable insight into this aspect of prison life.¹⁶ Baldwin¹⁷ reiterates that, while we continue to incarcerate women and mothers, exploring gendered emotion in carceral space is especially useful regarding informing

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12. The means by which private providers will be paid for 'successful outcomes' in relation to offenders and desistance. www.cjp.org.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink
 13. See the special edition of BJCJ Transforming Rehabilitation; Under the Microscope for a full discussion on TR. BJCJ. (2013, Winter). *Transforming rehabilitation: Under the microscope*. Vol. 11 (2/3).
 14. Baldwin, L. Mothering Justice: Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings. Sheffield on Loddon, Waterside Press.
Baldwin, L. (2017) Tainted Love: The Impact of Prison on Maternal Identity, Explored by Post Prison Reflections. *Prison Service Journal*, 233, pp. 28-34.
<https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/PSJ%20233%20September%202017.pdf>
Baldwin, L. (2018) Motherhood Disrupted: Reflections of Post-Prison Mothers. *Emotion Space and Society*, 26, pp. 49-56.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1755458616300500>.
See also 5
 15. Quinlan, C., (2011), Inside: Women in Prison in Ireland, Past and Present', Irish Academic Press. Quinlan, C., (2015), Women, Imprisonment and Social Control, in The Routledge *Handbook of Irish Criminology*, Routledge
Quinlan, C., (2016), Women, Imprisonment and Social Control, in The Routledge Handbook of Irish Criminology, D. Healy, C. Hamilton, Y. Daly, and M. Bulter, (eds), Pub. Routledge.
 16. See Baldwin 'Motherhood Disrupted' (13), Quinlan (14); also, Moran, D., 2015. *Carceral Geography: Spaces and practices of incarceration*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. Knight. V. (2016) *Remote Control: Television in Prison*. Palgrave Macmillan. Crewe, B., Bennett, P., Smith, A. and Warr, J. (2014) 'The emotional geography of prison life', *Theoretical Criminology* 18(1), 1 56-74. Jewkes, Y. and Moran, D. (2017) In: *Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 541-561.
 17. See 'Motherhood Disrupted' p56, 7 also 13.

the ongoing campaign for prisons without walls, for the design of 'compassionate prison spaces', and the continuing call for responsive, supportive, needs-led services for women post-custody.

One important aspect of a prison sentence is the fear that it generates. One woman described her fear on arriving in prison:

I felt so sick in the van, it wasn't travel sickness, I was genuinely sick with fear, I was so terrified of what was to come, of how I'd cope and even if I'd cope with being locked up (Lauren)¹⁸

Another woman described the fear she felt on leaving prison:

Leaving prison was hard actually, I'd been there so long I was 'somebody' there, the girls they all called me mum, even the staff said I was part of the furniture—the big wide world felt too big—I never thought I'd say it ...but I wanted my walls back. (Carla)¹⁹

As Rowe²⁰ reminds us, not all women are the same, nor will they experience and respond to prison in a way solely defined by gender. For some women, prison may provide respite from abuse or addiction, a place that might 'feel safer' than the 'outside', a place where safety, security, predictability and familiarity can offer comfort to some women.²¹ It could be argued that perhaps sometimes this reveals more about the deficiencies and pain of the women's 'outside' experience than it does about the 'safety' of prison. There is little doubt that for many women, prison feels less like a place of safety and more like a place of, judgement, punishment, anxiety, fear and indeed further harm. Prisons are experienced as places of pain, sadness, powerlessness and frustration.²²

Baldwin and Quinlan's studies found that, regardless of the widely varying individual circumstances, women who have experienced prison often describe the best and the worst of their emotions in the context of their own prison space; that is their cell or their room. No matter how stark or indeed how pleasant the room might be, that small space held powerful emotions.



Fig 1. From a woman's cell in Limerick Prison

it [the cell] was the only place I could go to really feel what I was feeling, you know...does that make sense? I could look at the photos and be happy without anyone judging me, I could cry and hold myself without anyone mocking me or feeling they had to comfort me I liked it best, weirdly, after lock up—when I could just be... (Lauren)²³

Lauren, a mother, in prison in the UK, also wrote the following poem describing how her prison cell gave her the opportunity to lose herself in her memories and photographs.

Frozen Time

*My room...has their photos
I can see them... and I love that
This place is my temporary home, my safety,
my place of dreams.
They are always in my dreams.
Frozen in time ...as I remember them...
In clothes I bought, hair I've brushed and kissed.
My snapshots of our frozen time...
Giving me both comfort and pain, giving me
glimpses of what I have
Or what I had....
I look at the photos in my cell,
my sanctuary my place to dream
I see them, I kiss their image,
but I can't feel them or smell them*

18. See 5

19. Ibid

20. Rowe, A. (2011) Narratives of Self and Identity in Women's Prisons: Stigma and the struggle for self-definition in penal regimes. In *Punishment & Society*. 2011:13:571-591

21. O'Malley S. & Devaney C (2015): Maintaining the mother-child relationship within the Irish prison system: the practitioner perspective, *Child Care in Practice*. Bradley, R. Davino, K. (2002). Women's Perception of the Prison Environment: When 'prison is the safest place I've ever been'. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 26(4):351-359. See also Rowe (19).

22. Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Moore, L. Scraton, P. (2013) *The Incarceration of Women: Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits*. London. Palgrave Macmillan. Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*. London. Penguin. Baldwin (2015) see 13 and Quinlan 2011 (14), Corston (2007) see (2).

23. See 5.

24. Ibid.

*My children, that hurts, but I look anyway,
 thoughts lead to memory lane
 I remember the day at the beach, or the one in
 nana's house
 I remember the smells of them, the candyfloss,
 nana's cooking
 I search my mind for every detail, but the smell of
 them I can't get to it
 How do you build a memory of a smell—it's what
 I miss most
 In my snapshots of frozen time, all is well, I'm
 there with them
 I can see them, feel them, smell them
 I should have savoured it all...*

(Lauren)²⁴

Present in this research, for both authors, was the women's need to make their prison cell or room 'home'. This creation of a home-like space linked to outside identities, particularly to that of 'mother'. Some mothers, if they did not find it too painful a reminder, would cover their cell walls with photographs of their children. Drawings and paintings, and even certificates sent in by their children would also adorn their cell walls.²⁵ Baldwin and Quinlan found that the women gained comfort and strength from creating their home-like spaces, describing how they used objects and artefacts, to create displays in which they took great pride. Their prison rooms and sometimes communal spaces were used to create spaces of relation and affiliation, and personal identities steeped in friendship, family and home. Quinlan suggests the women use their personal prison spaces and the artefacts they arrange and display within those spaces as performances of identity recuperation.²⁶ Using their prison space in this way facilitated the women in securing for themselves preferred identities, identities that challenged the spoiled identities ascribed to them in the criminal justice system. For the women, identification of this personal space with 'home' provided at least some of the 'home comforts' that many women describe missing so much. Associating their cell with home provided what one woman called an 'emotional sanctuary' from the wider prison space.

*you make your space comfortable ... you
 make it homely.... You make it home (Kady)²⁷*

For Anna, her prison space was not just her home, but a place where she was able to re-create the rituals associated with home 'outside':

*...when I come in here and close the door,
 well I think about home. I look at my pictures
 and my photographs and I just get away. I'm
 not here you know? If I get something new, if
 I get a new flower or a new ornament, I'll
 want to change the whole room around to fit
 in with it ...it's my room, my space and I like
 it. It's my own little world. (Anna)²⁸*

Conversely, many women feared the loneliness and 'empty time' spent in their cells—particularly during 'lock up' or at night. Several women described their fear at being left alone with their thoughts, and the negative emotions this might trigger. One woman said:

*...it made me feel dark and alone, it was when
 I couldn't help but remember stuff, It was
 when I missed my kids the most and it was
 always then I would cut up—I never felt safe on
 my own or in my own head... (Maggi)²⁹*

This woman worried that she might die in her cell, being fearful that her suicidal thoughts would eventually overpower her. She wrote her fears in her journal, as a series of poems, one of which is presented below:



Fig 2. From a woman's room in The Dóchas Centre, Mountjoy Prison, Dublin

Throughout these reflections, the fragility of women in prison, their vulnerabilities, are evidenced in these photographs, poems and voices. As explained, the personal space that the women had in prison was a space within which they could and did enact their own identities, their own sense of self. The mothering

25. See Baldwin 2018 (13) & Quinlan 2011; 222 (14).

26. Quinlan 2013; 222-221 (14).

27. See 5.

28. See 13.

29. See 5.

identity of some women was very evident in the way in which they presented their own prison space. The struggles that the women had with the person they believed they were and the person they believed they had become was evident in the reflections of many women. The difficulties they dealt with regarding presenting themselves to the world beyond their prison room or cell were evident. These difficulties are particularly well expressed in the following poem:

*I will tell them
I tell them I'm on holiday
I tell them I'm at work
I tell them I love them
I tell them I'm sorry
I tell them I will be better
I tell them I'll be home soon
I tell them I'm ok ...
I don't tell them I'm not really ok*

(Mercy)



Fig 3. From a woman's room in The Dóchas Centre, Mountjoy Prison, Dublin

Yellow

*Prison—people think it's grey and dark and awful
Mine is yellow—yellow—the colour of sunshine.
My old life was the grey, the dark, the awful
I can see blue sky from my prison,
The garden is the most beautiful I've ever seen
Lives outside the walls—we see them—
we won't have that life
But it's a view of hope—maybe we will—they say it's
about choice*

*I choose that life—is it really that simple
- No
So instead
I choose here—it's safe, it's home, it's calm
It's yellow here,
The colour of sunshine.
I choose this life
I won't leave.*

(Mary)

Conclusion

In this thought piece, we have tried to give a sense of the women imprisoned in Britain and Ireland; a sense of their identities, a sense of who they think they are and what their prison experiences mean to them. The poems and the photographs evidence the brave and valiant nature of women who experience incarceration, their determination to be who they are and to present to the world their 'best' selves from their prison space. It is clear that the women's relationship with their individual space in prison has relevance to their emotional wellbeing. This space is a deeply intense concentrated space, a space in, what Crawley³⁰ calls, the already 'emotional arena' that is a prison.

It is hoped this thought piece will serve to inform the design of and the need for compassionate prison spaces, as well as assisting in developing an understanding of what it means for women separated from children, family and home. Furthermore, we seek to remind those 'in charge' of the care and the control of women in criminal justice systems that women who enter prison bring with them all that they were before prison and all they hope to be on release from prison. Women who are prisoners are women first and foremost.

It is as clear today, 11 years post-Corston, as it ever was, that prison is very rarely the most sensible, appropriate or proportionate sanction for women who break the law. Prison remains an overly punitive, painful, and frequently unnecessary sanction which has a detrimental effect on women, and on their children's lives. It serves as a reminder to us all Corston's key recommendation that most women who break the law need holistic, compassionate needs-led responses, based in the community in 'prisons without walls'.³¹

30 Crawley, E. (2004) Emotion and Performance: Prison Officers and the Presentations

31 All the poems in this paper were written by mothers and grandmothers during Baldwin's Doctoral research study (see 5). All images included in the paper were taken as part of Quinlan's doctoral research, (see 14). Neither the poems or images can be reproduced without the permission of the authors.