

# WOMEN'S IMPRISONMENT;

## ISSUES

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# CURRENT

### Preamble

A most striking feature of women's imprisonment in Scotland is that the women in prison are on the whole those who have committed the least serious crimes. When in 1981 I questioned Scottish magistrates and judges about women's imprisonment, I received replies which indicated that what determined a woman going to prison was whether or not she was reported to be a good mother and/or a married woman living in the conventional home. The actual question I asked was: **What affects your final decision when you are initially uncertain as to whether to send a woman to prison?**

Here are some of the replies I received—all from different judges.

1. Women who live more ordered lives don't commit crime, because with a husband and children to look after they don't have time.
2. It may not be necessary to send her to prison if she has a husband. He may tell her to stop it.
3. Women with steady husbands or cohabiters don't commit crime.

They're kept occupied.

4. If she's a good mother we don't want to take her away. If she's not a good mother, it doesn't really matter.
5. If upon inquiry you discover that a woman has no children then it clears the way to send her to prison. If she has children but they are in Care then I take the view that she is footloose and

fancyfree and I treat her as a single woman.

6. If one finds out that they have left their husbands and that their children are already in Care . . . it may seem a very good idea to send them to prison for three months.

Thus, on the reasoning put forward by these judges and magistrates single women, battered women and women whose children are in Care for

any reason whatsoever are more likely to be sent to prison than are women who are seen to be worthy mothers and wives. Likewise with daughters who are seen to be either

promiscuous, or beyond parental control. One judge told me that prison was often the only place for young girls who were seen to be 'wild'. As an example of what he meant he said:

'I sent a young girl to prison last week. She had been sleeping rough, no hostel would take her and she'

would not cooperate with the Hospital. Her crime was comparatively trivial. She was shouting and swearing and there was doubt whether she had committed any crime at all. Prison was just one way of dealing with it.'

And of course there is also a class dimension. Middle-class mothers are more likely to be seen as good mothers. I could give several more examples.

The notion that women who are divorced, women who have children in Care etc., are necessarily bad wives and mothers is of course a myth. But

it is a myth which, along with many other stereotypes about women offenders, has had effects on prison regimes. In fact, prison regimes for women are based on the mistaken notion that women who go to prison are either mad, menopausal, or mal-adjusted to conventional women's roles. As a result, the regimes in the women's prisons are often based on the philosophy that women prisoners need to be medicalised, domesticated and feminised. There are other myths too.

What I intend to do is first give an introductory outline of the historical and statistical background to women's imprisonment in England and Wales. Then, I shall, in the main part of this paper, examine five current issues in greater detail. Finally I will conclude with some thoughts about the future—both about what is likely to happen in relation to women's imprisonment in the next decade, and what could happen if there were to be the political will both to reduce the prison population and make women's prisons more civilised environments both for staff and inmates. The five current issues that I will examine in detail are: 1) regimes in women's prisons; 2) the Prison Medical Service and drugs; 3) mothers in prison; 4) mixed prisons; and 5) providing for ex-prisoners.

**Women's Imprisonment in England and Wales** Although imprisonment as a distinct

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penal measure did not become a major mode of criminal regulation until the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1977; Ignatieff, 1978; Melossi and Pavarini, 1981) various houses of confinement had been used to regulate debtors, the poor, the bad and the mad from Saxon times onwards. Until nineteenth century programmes of penal discipline and penal administrative reform became predominantly concerned with rationalising and centralising the running of the men's prisons, gaol'd women were treated no differently to men.

Yet, from its beginning, the history of women's imprisonment has been a history of misogyny and public ignorance. Admittedly, early reformers such as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry did indeed campaign for the segregation of female from male prisoners (Howard, 1939) and different prison regimes for women (Ignatieff 1978), but the end results of their combined efforts were unfortunate. For, although the Prison Act of 1823 decreed that women prisoners should be housed separately from the men (Windschuttle, 1981), by the time the recommendations for separate and different regimes were being fully implemented, official thinking about imprisoned women had been inebriated both by the popular view that women criminals and prisoners are worse than their male counterparts and by the mounting academic claims that women criminals are abnormal women (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895). Consequently, and with the steady decline of the female prison population (Heidensohn, 1985), throughout the twentieth century women in prison have been consistently portrayed as being a pathological minority requiring strict disciplinary regimes and/or close psychiatric surveillance (Carlen, 1985).

Today, England's gaol'd women are held in six closed and three open prisons, two Youth Custody Centres and three Remand Centres. Their combined daily population is around fifteen hundred. Of all receptions, approximately a quarter will be remand prisoners of whom only 25-30% can expect a custodial sentence. Of sentenced prisoners, approximately 30% of all receptions will be for fine default, the majority of sentenced prisoners having been convicted of some relatively minor property offence. Less than 10% of all receptions will have a conviction for violence (Home Office

1985). More than 4 times the expected proportion of adult women in prison are likely to be from ethnic minority groups (Home Office 1986). Health-wise, it is as likely today as it was at the time of Professor Gibbens' 1967 study that at least 15% of the women will have a major physical ailment and 20% a major mental health problem (Gibbens, 1971). A sizeable number, moreover, will have either been brought up in institutions since infancy or put into residential 'Care' in their early teens. And not necessarily for committing a crime! In 1977, for instance, of all young people given Care orders on the grounds that they were in moral danger, 85.3% were female whilst only 14.7% were male (Campbell, 1981).

The majority of British women prisoners have not been gaol'd because of the seriousness of their crimes but because of their aberrant domestic circumstances or less-than-conventional lifestyles (Worrall, 1981; Carlen, 1983; Farrington and Morris 1983a, 1983b); the failure of the non-penal welfare or health institutions to cope with their problems (Matthews, 1981; Carlen, 1983; Smith, 1984); or their own refusal to comply with culturally-conditioned female gender-stereotype requirements. These sentencing practices, combined with academic and popular theories that have repeatedly implied that women criminals and prisoners are either mad, masculine, menopausal or maladjusted (to conventional female roles) have resulted not only in it being denied in some quarters that they are 'real' criminals and 'real' prisoners but also in the claim that the women's prisons are not 'real' prisons and furthermore that as there are so few women prisoners there is no cause for concern about them.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Although women still account for only just over 3% of the total prison population, in 1985/1986 the women's average daily population was 7% higher than in 1984/1985 (Home Office, 1986). Recent analyses suggest that the proportionate use of imprisonment for women has more than doubled in the past ten years with women tending to be sent to prison for less serious offences than men (NACRO, 1987a, 1987b). This suggests also that the sentencing logic of judges and magistrates is different to that used when men await sentence. Indeed, there is now a body of evidence from Cambridgeshire, Staffordshire,

Scotland and Warwick that women in prison are not always those who have committed the most serious crimes but are often those who are seen to be bad wives, mothers and daughters.

## Current Issues

### 1. Regimes in the Women's Prisons

What I will do now is give a run-down on the individual myths about women criminals and the effects which those myths have had on penal regimes for women. You will see for yourselves that official policies on women's prisons are shot through with contradictions.

**Myth 1—that women who go to prison are bad wives, mothers and daughters** has resulted in:

- 1) there traditionally being very little work for women other than domestic work;
- 2) education classes being limited and with an inappropriate emphasis on childcare and domestic economy;
- 3) officers constantly making women feel guilty about their children.

At the same time, and contradictorily, the fact that the women are seen as bad mothers is often used as an excuse for the often non-existent or very haphazard facilities for them seeing or communicating with their children whilst they are in prison. **Myth 2—that women who go to prison are not real women, they are masculine** has resulted in:

- 1) lack of facilities for physical exercise (The reasons given to me were that most normal women do not want to engage in either organised games or fitness training and that those who do were most probably already masculine enough anyhow.);
- 2) a constant officer commentary on women in terms of their deportment, their washing habits, their clothes and personal appearance in general;
- 3) much higher standards of behaviour are required of women prisoners than of male prisoners and that this, combined with the closer supervision which the comparatively fewer women prisoners receive, has resulted in proportionately more disciplinary charges being brought against women prisoners than against male prisoners.

**Myth 3—that most women who go to prison are mentally ill**, has resulted in:

- 1) very heavy doses of drugs are

- 2) dispensed at the women's prisons; the rigid regimes are justified on the grounds that the women are mad to begin with whereas in fact it could be argued that the regimes are such that they would be bad enough to drive any woman crazy;
- 3) the denial to women prisoners of any chances for self-determination or organisation (e.g. arrange leisure activities);
- 4) the trend to isolating women from each other.

In fact, the two major ways of informally controlling women outside prison have been incorporated into the prison regimes. These two ways are: (a) by domesticating women (b) by isolating them from each other.

Increased isolation is a particularly disturbing feature, I think, because so many prisoners I have spoken to have told me that one of their major problems outside prison was that they had felt very isolated, particularly from other women—because their men had not liked them to mix with other people.

Now, the reason why I have dwelt on the regimes in the women's prisons is because I not only very strongly support the claim of the late Professor Gibbens that though many women in prison look as mad as mad can be they are really reacting to prison life (Gibbens, 1971). I would also argue that some aspects of the regimes in the women's prisons actually provoke the very violent confrontations that they are supposed to contain (cf. Mandaraka—Sheppard, 1986). However, to understand why some women prisoners are so mentally vulnerable when inside, it is necessary to look beyond the prison itself and to remember that recent public expenditure cuts have resulted in health, welfare and housing authorities increasingly refusing help to the destitute, the homeless, those with drink and heroin problems, the mentally-ill and those suffering from a myriad of psychosocial ills too complex to be easily defined. Many prisoners have no-one on the outside who cares about what happens to them in prison.

Prisons are the only places that cannot refuse to take those women for whom neither the health nor the welfare services will take responsibility—even though the women's very minor crimes are but symptomatic of the syndrome of acute deprivation in which many of them have already been imprisoned since birth. Yet as

one prison officer commented to me, 'No-one in their right minds would send them to prison'. Prisons are not equipped to cope with the problems from which every other agency is copping out. Prison officers are not trained as surrogate parents, mental nurses, drugs counsellors, social workers or domestic science teachers. They are trained as discipline officers and as I have already claimed the discipline of the women's prisons often provokes the very violent situations it is supposed to prevent. Indeed, the proportionately higher numbers of discipline charges levelled against female as compared to male prisoners (Fitzgerald and Sim, 1979; Smith, 1984; Home Office, 1985) result both from regimes that aggravate and multiply the problems that many women already have when they go to prison and from discriminatory social ideologies that, in general, demand higher standards of behaviour from women than men. In plain words, women prisoners tend to get nicked for trivial offences which would be overlooked in the men's prisons.

Public expenditure cuts resulting in staff shortages are also likely to have contributed to an increase of tension within the women's prisons. Women already cooped-up and tensed-up beyond endurance are pushed to breaking point when, because there are not enough staff on duty to supervise them in association with other prisoners, they are locked in their cells for up to 23 hours. It is particularly unpleasant for women at the time of their periods to be locked in for so many hours with chamber pots and soiled sanitary towels. A walk around the walls of some women's closed prisons or Youth Custody Centres will often reveal several used sanitary towels that have been hurled out of the windows by women desperate to maintain the standards of cleanliness that they held outside prison.

And now, having touched on a problem relating directly to women's strictly biological rather than their gender-needs, let's look at two further and related current issues concerning women's imprisonment: the Prison Medical Service and the plight of mothers in prison.

## 2. The Prison Medical Service

Complaints about prison medicine for women have mainly concerned the level of drugs prescribed together with a feeling amongst many women prisoners that their gynaecological

and obstetrical needs have not been taken seriously. As with the issue of penal regimes for women, this issue can best be illuminated not by looking at the prison itself but by examining the operation of the prison medical service in the wider context of the medical treatment of women outside prison.

The question of prescribed drugs in prison is a thorny issue. It is likely that a much higher proportion of women prisoners than male prisoners have been prescribed (some would say over-prescribed) heavy dosages of drugs for years prior to their imprisonment. If the prison doctor then stops prescribing drugs which the "women have been legitimately prescribed outside (s)he is likely to be accused of being punitive. If, on the other hand (s)he continues to prescribe the large doses of drugs then (s)he is likely to be accused of drugging women solely for penal control purposes.

It seems to me therefore that in the long term it should be the aim of prison administrators to take pressure off the doctors by developing programmes that will reduce at least some women's tension and anxiety by non-pharmaceutical means. A number of research reports have indicated (Roberts, 1985; Doyal, 1985) the apparent refusal of male medics to take women's illness seriously is not peculiar to prison doctors. It is therefore doubtful whether the widely recommended integration of the Prison Medical Service with the NHS would be in itself reform enough. What I myself would like to see for women prisoners is NHS provision modelled on the Well Woman Clinics. But more about that later. I now turn to a group of women who have particular anxieties whilst in custody . . .

## 3. Mothers in prison

It is not my intention to argue that motherhood in itself should be seen as a reason for not sending a woman to prison. What I am arguing is that once a mother has been gaoled every effort should be made to ensure that if she has good relationships with her children they are maintained and that if the relationship with her children is already poor, it does not deteriorate further. At the last count, in 1982, over 1600 children under the age of 16 had mothers in prison (NACRO 1985).

Yet although one of the stated (and patently absurd) official claims

is that imprisonment aims to reintegrate prisoners into their communities. Women in prison constantly complain that communication with their families is routinely obstructed through censorship of letters and monitored and restricted visits. Imprisoned women whose children are in Care report that it is often difficult to get news of their families and that social workers visit the prison only to put pressure on them to have their children adopted. Women who are allowed to have their infants in prison with them are sometimes made anxious because they cannot develop their own routines with the babies. In 1985, a 17-year-old prisoner was separated from her 8-month-old child for the remainder of her sentence because of some minor disciplinary offences (NCCL, 1985). In fact, mothers in prison either fear that through loss of remission they will be separated from their children for even longer, or that as a result of their sentence, their children will be taken into residential Care for good.

Too often, children are used as disciplinary controls on women prisoners (O'Dwyer and Carlen, 1985). As one woman at Cornton Vale said, 'If women have kids outside they'll take any amount of stick off anybody' (Carlen, 1983).

As I shall be suggesting later, given the political will, the problems of imprisoned mothers could be dealt with much more imaginatively. In the meantime, interested parties will be debating the main recommendation of the Howard League's Inquiry into women's imprisonment—the proposal for what in the States are called "mix nicks"—prisons for men and women.

#### 4. Mix Nicks

The main conclusion of the Howard League's inquiry (Seear and Player, 1986) was that imprisonment is an inappropriate sentence for most of the women in custody in England and Wales. Yet, if custodial sentences were to be passed only on those found guilty of very serious crimes, the existing women's prisons would cease to be economically viable. A small centralised unit would be claustrophobic and would isolate women from their families; there would be too few prisoners to make it possible to provide the separate but adequate facilities that would enable women to remain closer to their homes. Hence the proposal for "mix nicks".

The major objection to mixed

prisons is that women in prison have problems enough without adding men to them. A prison officer spelled this out:

"So many women have been physically and sexually abused that prison gives them a breathing space—away from men. Those who do have good relationships with male partners could encounter other problems. Jealousy from the chap outside, maybe. Even an unwanted pregnancy. In fact, all inmates would have to be under much closer supervision to avoid sexual harassment."

An officer at a men's prison foresaw difficulties in selecting the male volunteers. He said, 'A majority of male prisoners are extremely sexist and that's putting it mildly. Others who might be okay would probably have wives or girlfriends who'd object to them going to a mixed prison'. A probation officer agreed: 'It would make our job more difficult too. First they separate families by sending people to prison, and now they propose mixed prisons which could make the partner outside wild with jealousy—however unfounded'. An ex-prisoner had a different worry and cynically foretold that relationships between men and women in prison would suffer the same fate as lesbian relationships: they would cause trouble between inmates and be used by some officers as additional disciplinary levers wherewith to exercise control over prisoners.

In the report, the difficulties are recognised but glossed over. Living arrangements in the mixed prisons would remain separate. No women would be forced into association with male prisoners. But, and here's the fundamental justification for "mix nicks", the report's authors assume that mixing with men is in any case a good thing for women. Not necessarily so.

Mixed day-centres and ex-prisoner hostels are already rejected by women who require space to be independent of men. Such women would be grossly disadvantaged in mixed prisons. Mix with men—or forego a whole range of work and recreational facilities. What kind of choice would that be? Indeed, it was recently put to me by female staff in a Californian jail (where all educational facilities are already shared by both men and women) that the numbers of women inmates attending classes would double if separate facilities for women were to be introduced.

In fact, my own prediction is

that although the UK female prison population is unlikely to be reduced in the near future, "mix nicks" might nonetheless be introduced by a government eager to run an expanding prison system as cheaply as possible. Having said that, I am prepared to recognise that mixed prisons might benefit women, though only under certain conditions, which I will outline later.

#### 5. Provision for women ex-prisoners

Prison is not only damaging during the course of a sentence. Coming out has its own problems and the snowballing effects of imprisonment are felt long after release. It is much less easy for any woman than it is for men to get rented accommodation and altogether the limited resources and support available for women leaving prison cater for very few. The Creative and Support Trust (CAST) offers knitting and pottery workshops, a means of earning money and, most importantly, a meeting place where women can get together and discuss both their prison experiences and their post-release difficulties. For instance, a high proportion of women prisoners have children in Care, placed there because of their mothers' imprisonment.

Regaining custody can be a new battle, one that becomes increasingly debilitating as released prisoners struggle to prove themselves to be "fit mothers". Frequently, this struggle occurs in circumstances where all the odds—especially the financial ones—are against them. Once imprisonment has resulted in loss of their homes, their chance of getting their children back are considerably lessened.

Whether or not released women have children, they are all likely to have problems with the DHSS and, additionally, a host of general fears and anxieties resulting from their imprisonment. Yet many women in custody are not informed of any outside support before, or upon, release (see also NACRO, 1986). Because of the isolation experienced by women after their release, most who go to CAST have only heard about the project through word of mouth or by pure chance.

By contrast with CAST, the Woman Prisoners' Resource Centre (WPRC) has succeeded in gaining access to almost every woman's prison in the country, though their work is severely restricted by lack of funds and staff in proportion to the needs

they attempt to meet. Most of the women seen by WPRC are still in prison, though there is also a drop-in referral facility at their office. Their main aim is to prepare women for release by dealing with at least some of the practical problems that frequently overwhelm a woman if she has no one to turn to. Most of their referrals (about 70%) are concerned with housing and future accommodation. They have been successful in gaining nominations for women ex-prisoners from housing associations and councils that had previously not acknowledged any special need. WPRC also attend to enquiries concerning DHSS benefits, family problems (divorce and child-custody cases), drugs and alcohol abuse, training and education. The WPRC information pack contains many useful addresses and contacts.

Probably WPRC's greatest achievement is in having introduced pre-advertised in-prison 'surgeries'. These are organised from outside the institution and are therefore viewed by prisoners as being both independent and accessible. It should, however, also be noted that the least independent, most institutionalised prisoner, the one in fact who is desperately in need of outside help, is still unlikely to be aware of these resources and how they might be of help to her.

While various hostels are prepared to take women ex-prisoners, vacant places are not always readily available, and again, too often women in prison are unaware even of the hostel's existence. A London based hostel catering exclusively for women ex-offenders is Stockdale House, which holds about thirteen residents. The length of their stay varies according to their need for support. This hostel receives nominations from housing associations and usually provides flats when residents are ready to move on: Stockdale is prepared to accept offenders other hostels reject either because of their reputation or their past record of violence. Unlike most hostels it makes places available for mothers with children.

I have mentioned these particular organisations because they are the ones I know most about. Undoubtedly there are others and certainly ex-prisoners often refer to the odd chance encounter with exceptional people, projects or institutions that have helped them. My main points are that at the moment many of these projects are only temporary, depen-

dent upon small grants, donations etc and, furthermore, that often it is a matter of chance whether or not the woman ex-prisoner actually comes into contact with an agency that can help her.

So what is likely to happen in the future?

### **1. More women are likely to be imprisoned in the future**

Although it would be unduly pessimistic to argue that there will be proportionately massive increases in the numbers of British women turning to crime in the next decade, present trends in sentencing suggest that more of those who do will be given custodial sentences. This is primarily because given present social trends, more of those coming before the courts" are likely to be those special categories which we know influence sentencing.

Some increase in the numbers of women charged with offences can also be expected, the major influencing factors here being: (1) the continuing deterioration in the general economic position of women in Britain; (2) the increase in drug-related offences; (3) increased regulation of prostitution as a result of AIDS-related fears; and (4) the knock-on effects of imprisonment itself that result in the narrowing of legitimate options each time a woman is incarcerated (see Rosenbaum 1981; Carlen, 1988).

The economic position of women in general has rapidly deteriorated over the last decade (Glendinning, 1987). This, combined with the immense increase in the numbers of lone mothers bringing up their children in poverty may well lead to an increasing number of women feeling justified in breaking the law in order to keep their children fed, clothed and with a roof over their head. The crimes most easily available to them are shoplifting, fiddling social security, and prostitution (see Cook, 1987; Edwards, 1987).

**2. At the same time—and also related to the increasing economic marginalisation of women—an increase in the numbers of female drug users,** a proportion of whom will become offenders and prisoners as a result of their addiction. Furthermore, present campaigns aimed at both increasing the chances of drunken drivers being caught and increasing the likelihood of their being mandatorily imprisoned upon conviction are likely, if successful, to bring increasing numbers of women into the courts and the pris-

ons—as is happening in the United States following the successful campaigning of Mothers Against Drunken Driving.

### **3. Increased links between drug-addiction and prostitution could also result in increasing regulation of prostitution as a consequence of growing fears about the sexual transmission of AIDS.**

At present, several English commentators argue that, because a majority of prostitutes insist on their clients using condoms, women engaging in prostitution fall into a low risk category in relation to the transmission of AIDS. Yet this argument could become less plausible if there is an increase in the numbers of women turning to prostitution in order to fund a drug habit. If the drug-dependant prostitute is seen to be less likely to be concerned with 'safe sex' and more concerned with 'turning a quick trick', then public demand for closer regulation of prostitution may increase, with a concomitant increase in the number of prostitutes imprisoned.

#### **Possible Trends**

Despite these gloomy predictions, I believe that there are a number of positive changes in women's imprisonment that a government committed to penal reform could make. I now conclude by listing those changes in relation to the five current issues discussed.

#### **1. Penal Regimes for Women**

As I have talked to prison staff, I have become more and more convinced that prison regimes (whether for men or women) will not be improved until prison officers are given a greater role in their development. I have heard very positive ideas for change put forward by women officers who have told me that, under the present hierarchical and centralised staff structure, they will have little chance of having their ideas taken seriously.

Be that as it may, it seems that as a priority there should be the development of programmes aiming to reduce the debilitating tension and anxiety suffered by women prisoners and that these programmes could include more life and career skill courses (as opposed to domestic and mothering courses); more opportunities for association both informally, in groups, and with people coming from outside the prison; and more effort

by the Home Office to contact volunteer professionals willing to give advice to prisoners—and to allow them to go into the prisons. All of these measures could also be seen as possibly contributing to a reduction in tension and anxiety by non-pharmaceutical means.

## 2. The Prison Medical Service

It is argued that provision for women should be modelled on the Well Woman Clinics which are being developed up and down the country and which are staffed by doctors especially interested in all aspects of women's health and who give patients a choice as to whether they are treated by a female or male doctor.

## 3. Mothers in Prison

Prison authorities should be particularly concerned to send this group out stronger (both mentally and physically) than when they went into prison. In this connection, I suggest that the Home Office examines the many American projects which involve having children fostered near to their mothers' prisons (Baunach, 1985); as well as enabling mothers to meet their families regularly, in decent facilities; and write to and telephone their families—from payphone call boxes on the reverse charge system.

## 4. "Mix Nicks"

These might also be progressive if they enabled imprisoned mothers to be nearer to their families: but, for the reasons I have given, they should only be introduced if the following conditions are also met: (1) that exactly the same educational and recreational opportunities be available to women who do not want to mix; (2) that the 'psychological benefits' of friendships between women also be recognised and lesbian activity cease to be an offence against prison discipline; and (3) that the whole experiment be monitored by an Equal Opportunities assessor.

## 5. Provision for Ex-Prisoners

Finally, it should be remembered that whether a woman goes back to prison or not is likely to be determined more by what she has on the outside than what has happened inside prison. Prisons do deter insofar as many women vow that they will never offend again because they cannot stand another prison sentence. Yet, despite these resolutions, whether or not women do re-offend seems to depend

very much on what they have going for them on the outside.

When I have asked women criminals what made them 'go straight', the answers have been: "Well, I got this flat—digs—job.". Or, "I met so-and-so". It is for this reason that I argue for a massive increase in the provision of educational and legal services for prisoners; a massive increase in hostel and other provisions for ex-prisoners; and a massive increase in provision for young women leaving residential Care. For it can be argued that imprisonment is more debilitating to women than to men: some men at least have prison experiences as a celebration of machismo—the experience of 'hard men'—whereas women who go to, prison are more likely to be seen as doubly deviant—as being both bad people and worthless women.

Insofar as prisons debilitate, women's prisons feed off their own product. But it is an indictment of this society, and not of the prison system, when women tell me that they will go out of prison to a world that has even less to offer than the prison itself. Depressed and alone, some sink into a state where they become careless of what happens to them. They re-offend and the circle repeats itself again and again.

By its essentially punitive nature, imprisonment cannot (and should not be) a pleasant experience, for men or women. It is in the interest of everyone in society, however, to ensure that steps are taken to decrease the likelihood of today's released woman prisoner becoming tomorrow's new admission.

The buck, in fact, does not stop at prison—but with the society which, as one prison officer graphically put it: "sends us all society's rejects—and then doesn't want them back".

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