

Incarceration of Women: Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits

Linda Moore and Phil Scraton, (2014)

The Palgrave Macmillan (Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology)

ISBN: 9780230576681

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This book is a committed and often damning account of the evolution of services to and experiences of women detained in prisons in Northern Ireland.

The authors set their empirical research, undertaken in two women's units in 2004 and 2006, within a wider context of the history of women's imprisonment (Ch. 1), of their analysis of the psychological effects of prison upon women (Ch. 2) and the institution's capacity to compound marginalisation and rejection, their exploration of the challenges of conducting independent research in prisons (Ch.3) and their account of the particular issues associated with the political imprisonment of women (Ch. 4).

The primary research (forming the basis of Chapters 5 -8) then provides the reader with a powerful insight into the sense of despair and futility of the women themselves and into the behaviour of prison staff who work within a system that has been shaped (arguably distorted) by decades of political and social upheaval, a system that prioritised the need for security over rehabilitation. Chapters 6 and 7 (Self-Harm and Suicide/Tale of Two Inquests) make for particularly difficult reading and exemplify both the disturbing experiences of the women concerned but also the ongoing and systemic failure of the N.I. Prison Service to respond constructively to glaring problems within women's units and its apparent resistance to change.

The evolution of the prison service in Northern Ireland is taking place in a unique and what the authors describe as 'a defining period of political transition and political transformation' (p.vi). Drawing upon this unique Northern Irish context, the book could, as it set out to do, have made a significant contribution to not only scholarship on 'the gendered politics, realities and resistances of women's incarceration' (p. viii) but also wider debates about the purpose of the prison system, the outcomes expected and the limitations in terms of individual rehabilitation. As it stands, however, the way in which the book is ordered risks undermining the power of the women's voices; the research seems to be presented in a way which proves a point rather than the points emerging from the research. The evidence they have uncovered is potent enough; there is no need to load the dice.

What emerges from the core chapters of this book is certainly a picture of a prison service for women who have offended, presumably seriously enough to attract a custodial sentence, squeezed into a system that has developed to meet the predominantly security needs of the

state. However, the reader arrives at Chapter 5, where the empirical research really takes centre-stage, via the four much more theoretical and polemical chapters preceding.

The issues explored in these four chapters are clearly pertinent to the context in which the research was undertaken but in exploring them in such detail, the authors' standpoint, the lens through which they go on to present their research, becomes increasingly intrusive. The language they sometimes use suggests a passionate antipathy towards imprisonment per se. Prison is described as an institution which 'imposes subtle and raw power' with guards and managers given the power to 'inflict pain and damage on the most vulnerable' (p.29). Prison, it is argued, is also 'predicated on the loss of a person's liberty and removing from the prisoner every vestige of personal and social identity' (p.54). Ironically, the authors' criticisms of research into prisons and other state institutions which, they argue, struggles to be independent, could also be levelled at their own research which is strongly influenced in tone and presentation by a determined personal and political analysis of incarceration, its principles and outcomes for society and prisoners alike. The balance required by truly judicious, objective research is lacking.

By choosing to preface the empirical research with these earlier chapters, the authors risk detracting from the power of that research. It is sufficient of itself to support not only arguments about agency and resistance but also issues that are raised about the purpose of incarceration within society, its effect upon both staff and prisoners, the complexities of defining 'what is criminal' (p.96), the particular needs of women who offend and 'institutional failure to deliver change'. These are all extremely important questions and the authors could have allowed the research to speak for itself and thereby lent more power to their own arguments.

As it is, the book feels inherently unbalanced with the research becoming overwhelmed by the polemic. How the research was conducted is broadly described but not the detail of who conducted it, how interviews were structured, or how many people were interviewed. Quotes representing the women's voices are clustered appropriately to illustrate aspects of their prison experience but it is rarely clear who the women are (e.g. whether they are 'political' or 'criminal' prisoners), whether they are short- or long-term prisoners, in what context they expressed their views (individual interviews or in focus groups) and sometimes, where several quotes are presented together, whether these are from one interviewee or from several. Occasionally some women do make positive comments about prison staff and it might be constructive (and relevant for the future development of services) to elucidate from these comments what are the qualities that make for effective and sensitive professionals in this context.

Maybe because of their own understandable frustrations at the pace and nature of change, the authors seem to overlook positives, seeing the resistance of prison guards as 'a fundamental obstacle to reform' despite quoting a 2011 Independent Monitoring Board Report in which it is acknowledged that 'there are staff who are currently responding positively to change' (p. 209).

The N.I. prison estate is already tiny by contrast with neighbouring UK jurisdictions so catering to the specific needs of women would always present a practical challenge. Knowledge about how best to work with women is still emerging and is 'under-theorised' (Gelsthorpe and Hedderman, 2012) by contrast with male-focused interventions. It is generally accepted, however, that effective female-oriented approaches are characterised by

comprehensive, holistic programmes which take account of and meet the multiple interconnected needs associated with women's offending.

Such programmes will also take account of powerful needs and strengths not directly associated with the offending but crucial to promoting the positive life experiences which may sustain an individual's resilience in the future, making them less vulnerable to offending choices (ref. Farrow et al). To provide such programmes is a challenge in larger jurisdictions which have the capacity to provide a range of services with some degree of flexibility. In the N.I. context, where women designated as 'ordinary criminals' are a minority within the already marginalised group of women prisoners, it seems to have been virtually impossible make a transition from prioritising security to 'accommodating the complex needs of ordinary prisoners' (p. 213).

Because I am aware of the very positive work now being undertaken with women both in the community and in custody both in other parts of the UK and countries as diverse as New Zealand and Spain, I cannot subscribe to the pessimistic stance that runs through this book. It is certainly true that women offenders will always be a risk of marginalisation in justice systems designed for men and this book is a powerful reminder of the effects of this. The book closes with a short paragraph which summarises an agenda for change. I wish that the authors had acknowledged that in fact there is hope to be found in the innovative and committed work that is being done elsewhere and encouraged readers to seek this out.

REFERENCES

Gelsthorpe, L. and Hedderman, C. (2012). 'Providing for women offenders: the risks of adopting a payment by results approach' in *Probation Journal* 2012 59: 374.