

A summary of women in prison criminology essay



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Women's segment is one of the fastest growing segments of prison population all over the world, but especially in the United States. The increasing amounts of women are locked in prisons due to different reasons. A lot of women in prisons are drug addicts who originally took drugs to escape a life of difficulty and childhood trauma. A lot of were caught being as "mules" in drugs trades. Also the main part of women in prison has been victims of domestic violence some time in their lives. Nearly all of imprisoned women are from poor and working class families.

Here are average demographics of women in prison, presented by Anti-racist group Committee to End the Marion Lockdown. During the years 1980 and 1993, the female population of prison increased nearly 313%, at the same time men increase 182% during the same period. In 1993 the number of women was 5.8% of the total prison population and 9.3% of the whole jail population.

Women prisoners are divided like this: African American women - 46%, White women - 36%, and Hispanic Women - 14%.

The majority of incarcerated women are poor. So 53% of women in prisons and 74% of women in jails were unemployed before incarceration.

The imprisoning of women has a bad influence on her family. 67% of women in prisons are mothers of children who are under 18. 70% of these women (and only 50% of men) had custody of their dependent children before imprisonment. Statistics shows that 6% of women are pregnant at the moment when they go to prison.

A big amount of incarcerated women had domestic violence. 32% of imprisoned women (nearly 4, 000 women) are in prisons because of murders of their husbands, ex-husbands or boyfriends.

<http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~kastor/walking-steel-95/ws-women-in-prison.html>

Women in prison suffer from violence, discrimination and other kind of injustices. It is known that 57% of imprisoned women have had severe and prolonged sexual and physical abuse. (3 Cristina Rathbone, *A World Apart*, Random House, May 2005, p. 22.). Being in prison, women are objects of sexual misconduct from correctional staff and other prisoners. (4 GAO report "Women in Prison: Sexual Misconduct by Correctional Staff" June 1999, p. 9).

Men and women are alike subjected to imprisonment but little attention has been given to the various needs and problems of imprisoned women as opposed to those of men. This omission may reflect the fact that women prisoners are a very small minority of the overall prison population: only four percent worldwide.

Throughout the world, the regimes in prison are nearly always created for the majority male prison population and that is why they don't provide for the women needs.

Female prisoners have different mental, physical, and emotional needs, not the same as men have. Prisons may be unable to offer adequate maternity and ante-natal care, or appropriate access to feminine hygiene products.

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Women can have different needs relating to problems such as substance addiction, mental health, and anger management, sexual or physical abuse.

Women in prisons have a higher level of mental diseases and are more likely to have been victims of all kinds of abuse than the general population and are at higher risk of self-harm and suicide. They may respond differently to security regimes and require less harsh forms of physical restraint. In mixedsex prisons the security regime may be disproportionately harsher for women because it is designed for men.

Most women in prison are mothers and/or the main carer for children, thus it is particularly important that ways be found of helping them to maintain family ties.

Research shows that custodial sentences are not appropriate for many women and not effective in reducing offending or reoffending. The experience of imprisonment can have damaging effects for both mothers and their children and can exacerbate mental health issues or problematic drug or alcohol addiction among women in prison.

So, here is a description of all levels of imprisonment, the description of women's life in prison and the destiny of children of women in prison.

1. Arrest of a woman. Police officers may not ask whether the woman they are arresting has children or allow her time to explain to the children what is happening or make arrangements for their care. This increases the anxiety of both children and mothers and makes the arrest more difficult for the officer.

2. Pre-trial detention. Women may be more likely to be placed in pre-trial detention than men. This is because on the indicators used to determine a person's likelihood of absconding before trial (such as secure employment and owning or renting property in one's own name) women tend to come out lower. Factors such as caring responsibilities are not taken into account.

Even if a woman is acquitted at trial, she may have lost her job, her home or her place on mental health or drug rehabilitation programs in the meantime. For children, having a mother placed in pre-trial detention has many of the same effects as having a mother imprisoned following conviction.

3. Sentencing. Despite their statistically small proportion in the overall prison population, the rate of imprisonment of women is increasing rapidly. The reasons for this appear to be changes in sentencing policy and law enforcement priorities, rather than a change in the amount or severity of crime in which women are involved.

Severity of sentence. Attitudes towards 'women criminals' may lead to harsher sentences, including imprisonment for offences for which men would not be imprisoned. Some discrimination against women reflects the social culture rather than specifically the criminal justice system: thus contravening social mores may lead to women being criminalised.

Type of crime. In most countries, women are in prison for non-violent, property or drug offences. Generally, women have a lower involvement in serious violence, criminal damage and professional crime.

Length of sentence. In many countries, a relatively high proportion of female prisoners appear to serve fairly short prison sentences. It should be borne in mind that a short sentence, for example six months, may be just as disruptive as a longer sentence for a woman prisoner, who may lose her children, her job, and her home as a result of the sentence.

4. Prisons. The number, type, geographical location and distribution of national prisons will affect the quality of women's imprisonment. The provision in a country is usually a practical matter of the resources available, and also reflects the penal philosophy of that country. Some factors are outlined below.

Location. Because there are fewer female prisoners there are fewer single-sex prisons for women. Women who are held in single-sex prisons are therefore more likely to be held long distances from their families and communities than men, making visiting and the maintenance of family ties more difficult. This is especially problematic for women who were the sole carers of dependent children before their imprisonment. It also affects other specific categories of female prisoners, such as juveniles, whose numbers are even smaller.

Level of security. Levels of security in prison are generally put in place to stop men escaping, which may mean that prisons are disproportionately harsher for women. In addition, the smaller number of women's prisons compared to men's means that there is less opportunity to provide institutions of different security classifications.

The prisons' regimes will be determined by the maximum security requirement, meaning that many women will be held according to a security classification that is stricter than could be justified by any assessment of the risk that they pose.

Shared facilities. Women with diverse needs and a history of offending may be inappropriately held together under the same security regime. Sometimes women awaiting trial are held with women who have been sentenced, which is contrary to best practice. Women who are detained in prisons which also hold men may be required to share facilities and attend classes with male prisoners. This is not a suitable environment for women who have experienced abuse or require strict separation from men.

Overcrowding. Prisons are often overcrowded and offer reduced exercise facilities, and time spent out of cells. This pressure may also reduce the numbers of available rehabilitative programmes - educational, vocational, counselling - as well as of drug and alcohol dependency programmes.

Education, training and work. Prisons may offer a range of educational and work opportunities - compulsory work or voluntary work (either paid or unpaid). In single-sex prisons where there are few women, access to education, training and work opportunities may be severely limited. In mixed-sex prisons women may be required to attend classes or work with male prisoners. This may be unsuitable and even threatening for some women.

In some countries, women prisoners are given traditionally feminine jobs, such as catering or sewing. This is not a problem if there is a market for such

skills outside the prison but jobs should not be allocated simply because of the gender of the prisoner. Women whose children live with them in prison may not be able to work or take education courses if there are no childcare facilities. Opportunities for prisoners awaiting trial and sentenced prisoners may also differ significantly.

5. Physical health & health care

General health and health care. Women prisoners suffer poor physical and mental health at rates and with a severity far exceeding those of male prisoners or of women in the general population. Some of this may be related to the reasons why they have been imprisoned, for example drug use and hence drug dependency and associated health problems. Sexual abuse and exploitation of women before and during imprisonment can lead to gynaecological problems, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, child-birth or abortion.

Disease in prisons. Diseases and infections associated with overcrowding and poor health and hygiene conditions such as tuberculosis, hepatitis and HIV/AIDS, are additional risks for women in prisons.

Drug & alcohol addiction. Prisoners are more likely to suffer from drug/alcohol addiction than in the community at large. Existing research indicates that 75% of women who go to European prisons are already drug and alcohol users and that female prisoners are more likely to be addicted to harder drugs than male prisoners.

Health care provision. Standards of medical care within prisons vary greatly both from country to country and from prison to prison. When health care

facilities are outside the prison they may offer better standards of provision, but they may create other problems such as:

€€ The shame and discomfort for women of being taken there in prison clothing or in handcuffs, particularly if they have to wait in public areas within the hospital.

€€ € Shortages of prison staff reducing the availability of escorts for women to attend hospital.

€€ € Male prison staff accompanying female prisoners and being present during medical consultations and examinations.

€€ € Perceived lack of security in civilian institutions leading to women being shackled to beds, even during child-birth.

Sexual health. Universally HIV among women prisoners is higher than in the general population.

HIV positive women risk passing the disease onto their babies and unborn children. Women's high rates of drug addiction expose them to the risk of catching HIV through sharing needles.

Female health & hygiene. The prison may not provide for the sanitary needs of women or women may have to pay for their own sanitary provision.

Women who are menstruating or going through the menopause need regular daily showers. It is humiliating for women to have to use washing and toilet facilities in the presence of others, most particularly during menstruation. They should also be able to change their bed linen frequently.

Older women may go through the menopause while imprisoned, and their medical and/or psychological needs need to be identified and met at this time.

They may also have particular health care needs such as hormone replacement therapy or food supplements.

Pregnancy and childbirth. Pregnant women in prisons need special resources and attention to diet, exercise, clothing, medication and medical care.

Prison is not an easy place to be pregnant and the inflexibility of a prison regime is incompatible with the needs and care of a pregnant body.

€€ € It is more difficult to catch up on missed sleep and missed meals and hard to take baths or showers as often as needed.

€€ € It may be difficult for the prison to transport prisoners to health care checks and scans, ante-natal classes and post-natal care.

€€ € Ante-natal and post-natal care may not be seen as medical priorities by prison staff.

€€ € It may be difficult for a prisoner to see a midwife.

€€ € Alerting staff to a medical problem, even the onset of labour, may be difficult, particularly at night.

€€ € The stress of imprisonment can have a deleterious impact on the development of a pregnancy.

Restraining pregnant women in the same way as other women prisoners may endanger both the woman and the fetus.

6. Mental health. Mental health problems are more spread among women prisoners than in the prison for men or in the general prison. A lot of women have problems with lower-level of mental health, such as personality disorder, which do not qualify them for a psychiatric bed. Such women may need access to treatments and therapy designed specifically for them, and even in women-only prisons conditions may not be ideal. Women can be extremely worried about what will happen to their children, especially in the early stages of detention. Research has suggested that this can exacerbate or bring on mental health problems.

Depression, self-harm and suicide. Doctors are more likely to diagnose depression in women than in men (even when they have similar scores on standardized measures of depression) and more likely to prescribe mood altering psychotropic drugs to women than to men. Outside prison men are more likely to commit suicide than women but the position is reversed inside prison, and self-harm in prison is a huge problem and more prevalent among women in prison.

7. Violence and vulnerability. In those countries where all prisoners are vulnerable to torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, women (and juvenile female) prisoners are particularly at risk, both from male prisoners and from male prison guards. The power imbalance between prisoners and guards together with the closed nature of prisons provide opportunities for

harassment, exploitation, abuse, prostitution, rape and indecent assault of female prisoners by staff, both male and female.

They may also be subjected to abuse and exploitation from other prisoners, both male and female.

Even in countries where this is not the case, such as in the UK, women prisoners are vulnerable to other prisoners. A high proportion of UK women prisoners tell that they feel unsafe.

The issues about safety and security of female prisoners include:

- € Location of female cells in mixed prisons.

- €€ € Location and use of shared facilities, in particular showers and toilets.

- €€ € Whether male prison guards hold 'contact positions' over female prisoners (posts which permit or require them to be in physical proximity to the prisoners, sometimes unsupervised by other, female, staff).

- €€ € Strip searches: women prisoners as a group are more likely than other women generally and/or male prisoners to have experienced sexual assault: this makes strip-searching especially traumatic for them.

- €€ € The existence or lack of effective supervision and complaints mechanisms which enable prisoners to complain without exposing them to intimidation or further abuse - for example, seeing a doctor in the presence of guards means that violence towards and abuse of prisoners by guards is less likely to be reported by the prisoner.

Women who are subject to sexual abuse or exploitation face the added problems relating to the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, the questions of pregnancy and child-birth or abortion, and all the associated physical, mental and emotional health issues.

8. Mothers in prison. Most women in prison around the world are mothers. Women are more likely to be the sole or primary carer for children and this factor makes the prison experience significantly different for women. The effects of maternal imprisonment on their families are generally more disruptive than the effects of paternal imprisonment. This is not adequately recognized by the criminal justice system.

Since the numbers of women who are sent to a prison are rather low and the tendency to send women to prison for lesser nonviolent offences is increasing, so the woman herself can not understand the possibility of imprisonment as the outcome of her deeds. That is why the woman doesn't have the opportunity to make any preparations or provision for her kids before being taken into custody. Such fact can be a cause of additional stress for her and her kids.

Prison visits from children. Visiting prisons can be a difficult and frustrating experience for children. So, traveling for a long distance, entering a grim building, being searched, spending time in a harsh adult environment with a mother that one might not even be able to touch may be extremely distressing to a child. This in turn may make the child's carer less inclined to undertake this arduous task, as well as leaving the mother distraught and reluctant to have further visits from the child.

Furthermore, the new carers may have their own family responsibilities, as well as financial constraints, which put strains on taking in additional children (leading to children moving from one carer to another) and in particular adding to the financial, time and emotional burdens of taking children to visit their imprisoned mother.

Evidence suggests that the children of imprisoned mothers, and particularly those who are taken into state care during the mother's imprisonment, are at significantly greater risk of developing criminal behavior in adulthood than other children.

9. Children of imprisoned mothers. The rights and best interests of the children of women prisoners are rarely considered during criminal justice processes, even though parental imprisonment has a major impact on their lives. There are three options:

€€ € The child has to go to prison with the mother, and the consequence of that.

€€ € The child is separated from the mother, and the consequence of that.

€€ € Where there is more than one child and they are treated differently; i. e. one goes to prison with the mother, the other is separated, and the consequences of that.

Within each of these, there are then a number of matters to be considered which are encapsulated in the table overleaf.

Children separated from their mother. Children left in the community may be looked after by their father, grandparents, other relatives or friends of the family, taken into state care or left without carers.

Siblings may be separated from each other in order to make the situation not too difficult, or they may be taken into State institutions.

A prisoner living in insecure or rented accommodation will usually lose this when s/he enters prison and getting accommodation when released is often difficult. A mother whose children have been placed in the care of the state or another person usually cannot reclaim custody without appropriate accommodation, so even a short prison term may lead to permanent separation of families.

Registering details of prisoners' children is not part of the reception procedure in many countries. Some prisoners may not disclose this information voluntarily for fear that their children will be permanently taken away from them. As a result, governments do not make social provision or policies which address the problem of children with incarcerated parents.

The imprisonment of the mother has a great impact on the children; it affects every aspect of their lives and not just the relationships with their mother. It feels the same as while the bereavement, but with less support, from the new carer, teachers, and other people. Children of imprisoned parents have an increased tendency to exhibit aggressive and anti-social behaviour compared to the general population.

Researchers have found that the effects of parental imprisonment can be serious. Studies of prisoners' children consistently report that children experience a range of psychosocial problems during the imprisonment of a parent, including: depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, regression, clinging behaviour, problems with sleeping and eating, running away, truancy, low school grades and delinquency. The impact on the children will, of course, vary according to their age, surrounding family and community response, environment and individual character.

Babies and children in prison. Some women may spend part or all of a pregnancy in prison and give birth while still serving their sentence. The bonding of an infant with her/his primary carer is essential for her/his long term emotional development and should be given high priority. If mothers give birth while serving their sentence, or are imprisoned when they have a baby or young child, that baby or young child may come into the prison to live with them. Special resources and facilities available to mother and babies in prison varies, but usually consist of accommodation within a specialized Mother and Baby Unit (MBU). Toys are sometimes provided for the children and the mother may have more freedom in terms of staying in an unlocked room, having access to a kitchen in which she can prepare food for the child etc.

Because of the small number of women in prison who have children living with them, the number of MBUs is low, meaning that a mother may be imprisoned a long way from the rest of her family. This creates problems regarding prison visits and maintaining contact with any older children in the

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family. Additional concerns about babies and children living in prison are the effect this has on their development - physical, mental and emotional.

How long babies or young children can reside in prison with their mothers - or even whether they can do so at all - varies considerably across countries. The separation of mother and child can be a very traumatic experience for them both.

Some countries try and make the separation process as gradual as possible, in order to ease the pain and trauma of separation.

Babies and young children who are living in prison with their mother also require specialized health care. Women who know that their children will be removed from them shortly after birth may exhibit mental health problems and/or reject the baby or fail to bond with it.

10. Maintaining links with family. When imprisoned mothers are the primary carer of children, separation from their mothers is usually more traumatic than if the father is incarcerated; this is of course much worse where the mother is the sole carer. Research has shown that if family ties are maintained, the chances of prisoners re-offending upon release are lowered, so it is important to take measures to try to preserve these ties. Problems in maintaining these links include:

€€ € Doing so through letters is hard for those with low literacy skills, and self evidently problematic in relation to young children.

€€ € Overcoming what is often a greater distance between the woman and her family.

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11. Specific groups of prisoners.

Foreign nationals. Foreign national women prisoners may be either resident or non-resident in the country where they are imprisoned. Common difficulties may be faced by both male and female foreign national prisoners, such as problems relating to language and misunderstandings surrounding the customs and cultures of the host country, which may lead to isolation. In prisons where the prisoners are dependent on external assistance, whether for basics such as food, hygiene products and clothing, or for small luxuries, women without family at hand to visit not only face the direct problems of not having such items, but are vulnerable to exploitation by other prisoners or prison guards in order to receive the necessities for living.

Foreign national women who are not resident in the country of imprisonment may often be very far away from their children and families, causing them anguish and anxiety. Their children may not have the financial means to come and visit them. Telephone calls may be prohibitively expensive for both the mother and her children and difficult to arrange because of time differences. If the children are too young to read and write, then communication via letters is not an option.

Many women foreign nationals in prison are there for drug smuggling and may have left their children in the temporary care of friends or family, expecting to return in a few days. Imprisonment may put a woman's family (children and others) in significant danger from the people who employed her to smuggle drugs. Resident foreign national women can face deportation when they have completed their sentence, which means further separation from their families, or their having to relocate as well.

Transgender prisoners. Transgender prisoners face particular difficulties and pose special challenges to the prison system precisely because of the question as to their classification as male or female prisoners.

Racial minorities/ indigenous prisoners. In many countries with indigenous populations, indigenous women represent the fastest growing segment of the prison population. Their “ double minority” status within the prison system, being both indigenous and women, means that where training and other programmes exist they may have to choose between those intended for indigenous men or for non-indigenous women. They may also have different needs from other women prisoners.

12. Post-release issues. Women leaving prison receive varying degrees of support from the prison and social services. They may face many problems in addition to the pressures which may have caused them to commit their initial crime, such as: getting a job, finding accommodation, staying drug or alcohol free and regaining custody of children who have been in state care during their imprisonment. Even a short prison term may lead to the mother losing the rented accommodation in which she had been living, and it is common for a mother to be unable to regain custody of her children if she does not have anywhere to live. This makes it very difficult for women to resume normal lives outside of prison, and may be a factor which contributes to re-offending.

Although all released prisoners face issues surrounding their efforts to reintegrate into society, for parents these may be compounded by the need to reconcile with children who may have changed (as well as grown up)

during their absence. These children may have taken on new roles in the family and developed close relationships with alternative carers, both of which can cause tension if the returning parent tries to go back to 'the way things were'. Reoffending by parents can also have a devastating impact on their children, as they lose their parent for a second time.

As it was written above, the female population in the U. S. prison is escalating faster than the male population. According to statistics, the U. S. has 10 times more women in prison than the combined nations of Western Europe. (<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lormand/agenda/0107/womenprison.htm>. Phillis Engelbert, "Women in Prison", Agenda, July/August 2001).

Women are sent to prison for different crimes, but there they need a specialized care and treatment. A lot of women have drug and alcohol problems and need to be treated accordingly. A lot of women in prison have children and this is one more reason for special treatment.