Women's Transitions from Custody in Northern Ireland – Time After Time?

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Summary: This article reports on selected findings from *Time After Time – A Study of Women's Transitions from Custody*, a research study of women's experiences of imprisonment and their transitions from custody in Northern Ireland. The study documents their journeys over time – how they cope with adapting back into their families and the community, the difficulties they face and the extent to which their reintegration is helped, or otherwise, by agencies, whether official or voluntary. It is clear that their period of imprisonment left a long-lasting and damaging effect on their lives, affecting their partners, children and other family members. Stigma, issues in reconnecting with children and families, and challenges in finding employment are described. The article concludes with recommendations for service development and future work supporting women in their transition from custody to the community.

Keywords: Women, imprisonment, sentencing, custody, transition, resettlement, Northern Ireland, family, gender, children, mental health, employment, stigma.

Introduction

This article reports on selected findings from research conducted on women's experiences of imprisonment and their transitions from custody in Northern Ireland. Using a 'life-history' approach and based on multiple interviews with 14 women over a nine-month period, it reflects some of the challenges and problems the participants faced on their journeys into, through and out of custody. The study is unique in that it aimed to explore not only women's experiences of custody, but also their transition back to the community – their plans, hopes and concerns. Importantly, it documents their journeys over time – how they cope with adapting back

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into their families and the community, the difficulties they face and the extent to which their reintegration is helped, or otherwise, by agencies, whether official or voluntary.

The research study was conducted with the support of a Griffins Society Fellowship.[1] The study report, *Time After Time – A Study of Women's Transitions from Custody* (O'Neill, 2016) has full details of the study, findings and recommendations arising.

The findings outlined in this article highlight the impacts of custody on women and the challenges of transitioning back to the community. In particular, the impact of stigma and issues in reconnecting with children and families and finding employment are described. The article concludes with some recommendations for service development and future work in this area.

Women and custody

Research on women's pathways into crime indicates that gender matters significantly in shaping involvement in the criminal justice system. Themes from this literature include the nature of women's offending, experiences of women in custody and strategies for desistance (Corston, 2007; Convery, 2009; Scraton and Moore, 2004). More recently, attention has centred on women exiting prison (Carlton and Seagrave, 2013) and the secondary impacts of custody on families and community (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002). A number of similar studies focusing on themes such as the reintegration of offenders into society have emphasised the importance of accommodation, substance treatment and trauma counselling in encouraging desistance (Weaver and McNeill, 2010).

While men and women may encounter similar challenges upon release from custody, women's experiences are often qualitatively different from those of men (Loucks, 2004). Reports from the UK suggest that approximately one-third of women in custody lose their homes while in prison and many do not have any accommodation arranged prior to their release (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). Women are more likely to be single parents and the main carers for children; it is estimated that over 17,240 children were separated from their mothers in 2010 as result of imprisonment (Prison Reform Trust, 2011).

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[1] The Griffins Society is a charity that focuses on women and girls in the criminal justice system. It annually sponsors research fellowships to enable practitioners to conduct research on issues affecting women within the criminal justice system. Further information is available at http://www.thegriffinssociety.org

On leaving custody, women face lives that are often more difficult and stressful than they experienced prior to imprisonment, especially regarding the sourcing of suitable accommodation, employment, dealing with substance misuse issues, experiences of intimate partner violence, ill-health and trauma. Moreover, the support they receive post-custody is often inadequate (Carlton and Seagrave, 2013; Kerr, 2014).

Northern Ireland

The Criminal Justice (NI) Order (2008)[2] introduced new post-release supervision for prison sentences in Northern Ireland. This included the Determinate Custodial Sentences (DCSs), Extended Custodial Sentences and Indeterminate Custodial Sentences, all of which involve periods of imprisonment followed by supervised licence. During the licence period after release, a person is liable to be recalled to custody if they breach their licence conditions.

Between April 2013 and March 2014, 809 licences were issued in relation to 761 people; 21 of the licences were for women. During 2013, only three women were recalled to custody. While this may appear a low figure, it represents 14% of the total. No matter what the figure is, there is an onus to be mindful that behind each statistic is a woman who faces the consequences of returning to prison.

It is important to note that women's interactions with the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland take place within the context of a society emerging from a period of civil and political conflict. The *Cost of the Troubles Study* estimated that 3585 people were killed, of whom 200 were women, and an estimated 40,000 persons were injured over the period 1969–1999 (Fay *et al.*, 1999).

Many people were affected socially, psychologically and economically. The psychological impact was compounded by physical and social problems such as unemployment, the loss of a home and/or displacement (Smyth *et al.*, 2001). In addition, other forms of trauma were derived from grief, imprisonment or intimidation (Smyth and Hamilton, 2002).

Women who offend in Northern Ireland are evidently affected by the challenges faced by a society emerging from conflict, where peace-building continues despite setbacks and community violence (Kerr and Moore, 2013). The whole subject of women's offending in Northern Ireland needs to take account of the particular difficulties and traumas

[2] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2008/1216/contents/made

faced by women who grew up 'under the spectre of war and trauma of bereavement, displacement and violence' (McAlister *et al.*, 2009: 4).

It is estimated that nearly half of the Northern Ireland population, and in some areas up to 80%, know someone who was injured or killed during the conflict (Ruane and Todd, 1999). Throughout the conflict, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) had to deal with unique demands due to intensive security arrangements arising from the management of politically motivated prisoners, alongside men and women who committed so-called 'ordinary' crimes (Corcoran, 2006). A Prison Review Team report (Prison Review Team, 2011) commented that this security focus continues within Northern Irish prisons to the present day.

Women in prison in Northern Ireland

Women's experiences in custody have been documented, in particular those who were held as political prisoners (Brady, 2011). However, less is known of the experiences of women who were imprisoned for committing 'ordinary crime' but were detained alongside political prisoners.

Women prisoners were housed in Armagh Jail until its closure in 1986. Women were moved to Mourne House in 1988, a purpose-built, high-security unit in the grounds of Maghaberry Prison, a large high-security male prison. The Belfast Agreement of 1998,[3] also known as the Good Friday Agreement, and the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998[4] led to the release of politically motivated prisoners, leaving the remanded and sentenced women offenders, including those seeking asylum and fine defaulters, in custody.

With an average daily population of 30 women, and the majority of those serving sentences of less than three months, criticism was levelled at the regime, staffing levels and overall atmosphere at Mourne House, which continued to operate as a maximum-security facility (Moore and Scraton, 2009). Following a number of incidents, including the suicides of two women, women prisoners were transferred to their current site, Ash House, in Hydebank Wood Prison. This is a stand-alone residential unit on a site shared with a young offenders' centre, known as Hydebank Secure College.

Women prisoners have remained in Ash House since 2004. However, despite the change of venue, criticisms continue to be directed at NIPS

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement
[4] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/35/contents/enacted

for retaining many of the policies and practices of the past (PRT, 2011). NIPS has been subject to considerable scrutiny in the past decade. Since 2005 there have been over 20 external reviews and inspection reports, most of which have identified deficits in policy and practice.

Owers Review

In April 2010, policing and criminal justice powers were devolved from Westminster to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Given the historical concerns in relation to the prison service, Justice Minister David Ford announced a review of the conditions of detention, management and oversight of all prisons. Led by Dame Anne Owers, former HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in England and Wales, the review team was tasked to review the 'conditions of detention, management and oversight of all prisons ... [and to consider] a women's prison which is fit for purpose and meets international obligations and best practice'.

The Prison Review published its final report in October 2011. It noted that the arrangements for accommodating women prisoners were unsuitable, and recommended:

> A new small custodial facility for women should be built, staffed and run around a therapeutic model. It should be supported by an acute mental health facility and draw on a network of staff, services and support in the community. (PRT, 2011: 36)

NIPS has accepted the need for a new purpose-built female prisoner facility. However, in the current financial climate there is no formal indication of when this might be achieved. Structural changes to the current site have been made to provide additional resources, and a step-down facility was opened in October 2015.

Women in Northern Ireland commit fewer crimes than men, and the offences are of a less serious nature (O'Neill, 2011). On any given day, the number of women in custody constitutes a small proportion of the prison population. On 31 March 2017, there were 47 women in prison in Northern Ireland, comprising just over 3% of the overall population (NIPS, 2017). Although comparatively low, the average female daily population increased by 200% in the period 2003–2014, while the male prison population also increased, at a slower rate (Department of Justice Northern Ireland (DOJNI), 2015).

The female prison population tends to be older – almost a third aged 40–49 – and women tend to serve shorter custodial sentences. Theft is the most common offence (20%) for which women are sentenced to custody (DOJNI, 2015). The number of women subject to Probation supervision in the community is small, but higher than their proportion in prison. On 31 March 2017, 400 women under Probation supervision constituted just over 9% of Probation Board for Northern Ireland's (PBNI) caseload (PBNI, 2017).

Methodology

The research study aimed to explore the transition of women from prison into the community through women's own accounts of their experiences in custody, their plans, hopes and any concerns for release, as well as hearing over time their journey in returning to the community.

As the study was based on one-to-one, in-depth interviews over time with a small sample of women, this was a qualitative, longitudinal research approach. This methodology allowed the researcher to explore topics in depth using a semi-structured approach, which enabled deeper exploration of important aspects that surfaced spontaneously in the course of interviews. It was planned to interview each woman on four occasions.

The sample was derived from the population serving sentences or on remand in Ash House during the study period. In July 2014, there was an average daily population of 61 women, of whom 44 were sentenced prisoners and the remaining 17 were on remand.

Given the aims and scope of the project, it was planned to include 15 women in the study and to follow their journeys over a period of nine months. Recruitment was based on purposive sampling. The researcher met with women identified as due to be released within the period and provided them with information on the study. Initial meetings involved explaining the project, outlining the parameters (including confidentiality and informed consent), and answering any questions about the research.

It was made clear to all women that there would be no negative consequences if they chose not to participate in the research, and that participation in the project would not impact on the services they received. Women were free to withdraw from the study at any point without having to explain their reasons. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from NIPS and PBNI. The project was subject to full ethical review by the Office for Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland (ORECNI).

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet, and those who agreed to participate signed a consent form. Baseline interviews were conducted with the women while they were in custody, and their agreement was sought to contact them on their release. The plan was to meet with the women on three further occasions, at three, six and nine months post-release. Eighteen women met the study criteria, and 14 women were ultimately recruited to the study.

The first interviews took place in July 2014 and the final interviews were conducted in August 2015. Of the 14 women who were interviewed in custody, 12 were subsequently interviewed three months post-custody; of this group nine women were interviewed again at the six-month and nine-month post-custody stages. The reasons for attrition included non-contact by participants, and women moving to other areas.

The final sample, therefore, comprised 44 interviews. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data were thematically coded. This began with open coding, which involved searching the data for emerging concepts and repeating ideas (Strauss, 1987), drawing on existing theory as a starting point for formulating themes (Bryman, 2008).

Through the process of coding, other themes emerged which were noted both within the transcripts of individual women and across the transcripts. What follows is an overview of the profile of the participants in the study and an outline of some of the key findings. Pseudonyms have been used and care has been taken not to include any personal identifying information in order to protect participants' anonymity.

Profile of participants

All the women were white, and only one woman was not born in Northern Ireland or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Their ages ranged from 20 to 61 years; eight were over 40 years of age, reflecting the average age of women held in custody. The majority were mothers (12) and eight were in current relationships or had been in relationships prior to their committal.

The entire sample reported that their mental health had been adversely affected by their period in custody; six women advised that they had previously self-harmed. Accommodation problems were an important issue for many of the women: eight were unsure what accommodation would be available to them on their release or were returning to unstable or temporary accommodation provided by family and/or friends.

Half of the women had a job prior to their committal to custody; however, six had lost these jobs as result of their incarceration. Only two were confident that they would be able to secure employment, although six spoke of their hopes of employment following release. Only three women secured employment over the nine-month period; these three had been working prior to their committal to custody.

Previous experience of trauma was relevant for all the women interviewed. Nine described experiences of domestic violence, both historical and recent. Other trauma, including bereavement, loss and displacement, was revealed. All participants had been prescribed medication in relation to their mental health, both before and during their imprisonment. Substance misuse included misuse of prescribed medication. Alcohol ($n = 9$) and drugs ($n = 4$) were reported as having influenced their offending.

For six of the women this was their first offence. For the remaining eight, their previous convictions ranged from one offence to 33. For the majority, this was their first experience of custody.

The offences for which they were sentenced or remanded into custody included violence against the person ($n = 3$), theft ($n = 6$), perverting the course of justice ($n = 2$), public order offence ($n = 1$), driving without insurance ($n = 1$) and allowing self to be carried ($n = 1$). This range of offending reflects the overall offending profile of women in custody (NIPS, 2015).

The length of periods in custody varied from three months for a theft offence to 14 months for violence against a person. The majority of women ($n = 12$) were sentenced to a period of 12 months' custody or less:[5] on average, women were serving longer sentences than the sample in Northern Ireland. Six of the women were subject to post-release supervision. Only one of the women in the sample had been assessed by the PBNI as being of high risk of harm to others. This is consistent with PBNI statistics (O'Neill, 2011).

In Northern Ireland, 35% of the population reside in rural areas. The limited availability of private and public services in rural areas can cause difficulties for women returning to their communities, particularly where they are dependent on public transport to access services. Shops, schools, banks, post offices, police stations and Probation offices have closed due to the decline of the population in their catchment areas, market forces

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[5] This period includes the period of custody as directed by the court and not the period of post-custody licence.

and rationalisation programmes. This has resulted in a lack of facilities particularly for women in rural areas (Walsh, 2010), and in isolation. Seven women in the sample lived outside the Greater Belfast area in small towns ($n = 2$) or in rural communities ($n = 5$).

Experiences of custody

While all women found it traumatic to go to prison, it was particularly harrowing for those who were first-time offenders and who were not expecting to receive a custodial sentence. Women in this position described being unprepared and fearful of their situation, not knowing what to expect or how to manage. In contrast, those who were expecting a custodial sentence spoke of the plans they had made – much of which centred on the care of their families:

> *Just simple things like getting them (the children) to go to do the groceries on a weekly basis … working out bills, for example, rates, TV, electric, credit unions, leaving out cards and making them go in on a Friday afternoon to pay the bills and … and teaching them how to make dinners.* (Cora, age 49, pre-release)

Prison is particularly difficult for women who are the primary carers for their children. Many spoke of the pain of separation. It is estimated that between 17,000 and 18,000 children per year in England and Wales are affected by the incarceration of their mother (Corston, 2007; Fawcett Society, 2009).

The consequences of imprisoning a woman with children, particularly where she is the sole carer, can be devastating (Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001). Women described the experience of separation as the most difficult aspect of imprisonment, particularly with the potential loss of custody of a child while in prison (Loucks, 2004):

> *The experience in here has affected me, definitely, I'm very emotional, and I just cry pretty much all the time. I just have to pick a certain subject and I'm gone, you know, but I find it hard to talk about my children in here and I find it hard to talk about the impact it's had on my children.* (Jane, age 29, pre-release)

While many women noted the pains of custody, some viewed prison as a

place of safety, given that prior to custody they had survived childhood abuse, profound domestic violence, substance addiction and suicide attempts. The extent to which women perceived prison as a 'place of safety' was a reflection of the pains of their life on the outside:

> *I went through a lot of domestic violence with [partner name] for years …* *I have been trying to get away from him for years, and I couldn't and then* *coming up these last three years, I sort of went off the rails myself, I started* *drinking and shoplifting … The first sentence was the best thing that ever* *happened to me. I maybe wouldn't have been alive if I hadn't come in here.*
> (Anna, age 45, pre-release)

It is of concern that women such as Anna find refuge and support in custody rather than through services in the community. It is obvious that community services are failing to engage with women in need or those women are unable to access the services in times of need. Research consistently notes the high numbers of women with mental health issues and experience of trauma in custodial settings (Corston, 2007; Bloom *et al.*, 2004).

In interviews, women described adjustment to prison life by development of a variety of coping mechanisms. Some women reported that they immersed themselves in prison culture and availed of programmes, classes and activities, building up friendships along the way:

> *When I came in, I was distraught, totally distraught; I thought I was never* *going to do it. Then I found my feet, I thought this is not really as bad as you* *think … I did a parenting course through Barnardos. It was very good; there* *was only four of us who did it … I've worked in the kitchen and I've worked in* *the gardens. I work with the dogs, Dog Orderly; yeah have learnt quite a lot.*
> (Fiona, age 40, three months post-custody)

Women's experiences of prison differ. It became clear, over the period, that what they retained from their time in custody had an impact on how they settled back into the community. Women who could identify positive experiences were able to transfer such experiences to the challenges they met on their return to the community. This included an acknowledgement that they had survived prison, or indeed that the experience of incarceration had strengthened their determination not to reoffend:

You know, it gives you strength you didn't know you had. I didn't think I'd cope ever, ever. I mean when I went in I put myself on suicide watch, I said I'll never cope here and you know, never. And then it took me probably a good month to settle, but then you just settle, it's a way of life, you know; I'm in for four months, I have to get on with it, and I did. I never ever thought I would ever, ever cope in prison ever … I'm a lot stronger now. (Fiona, age 40, nine months post-custody)

Fiona's feeling of strength is based on the fact that she had survived her period of incarceration. Despite emerging difficulties on her return to the community, she could draw on perhaps the only positive element of her experience in custody – that she coped with the regime.

Women who maintained negative perceptions of their period in custody were not as positive about their ability to sustain their lives in the community. This was particularly prevalent for those serving short sentences and for women who reported a lack of meaningful engagement in activities while in custody. They were unable to identify any positive factor from their experience of prison, which would build up their confidence and resilience in managing the challenges they would face on their return to the community.

Isobel is a young woman who had no previous experience of prison and no previous criminal record:

I don't understand the point of a prison 'cos people say it's … it literally just punishment, there is no rehabilitation, there's no nothin' … there's no benefit here, you know, it is just a punishment, I would understand why people get worse 'cos there's nothing here to make them better … you just think of why am I here? … You don't get that rehabilitation of what's wrong and right, you know, there is none of that in here … It's just a case of locking them behind the door, lock them away, when they've done their time throw them back out and if they do the same thing, they're back in again. (Isobel, age 20, pre-release)

The initial weeks following release

Many of the women described a sense of loss and disorientation in the initial days and weeks following release. Even women who had served short sentences spoke of the difficulties they encountered on leaving prison. Some found it difficult to cope with the freedom and especially having

to make decisions on their own. Even familiar and simple tasks, which might have been routine before they went into custody, were considered taxing. Being among crowds of people, travelling and having to use public transport were cited as causes for concern. The most prominent concern was the fear of meeting people they knew.

Previous research (Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001) notes the impact of institutionalisation on prisoners with long sentences. An important finding of this study was that women who had spent short periods in custody reported a relatively rapid process of institutionalisation:

> *It's daunting getting out. It's very daunting, very, but in a way I'd rather stay, because I'm used to this routine and this way now, you know.* (Grainne, age 35, pre-release)

> *In the nine months you definitely do become a little bit institutionalised, you do get used to that routine and obviously when you are in you don't have to worry about bills and you don't have to worry about the heating and you don't have to worry about stupid things like TV licences and stuff but when you come out, it's like a complete reality check again because you have all this worry.* (Jane, age 29, three months post-custody)

The effect of institutionalisation was felt most profoundly when women exited custody to return to the uncertainty of life in the community. For some women, this uncertainty was compounded because they did not know where they were going to live or have any source of support:

> *I haven't really [support] as far as I know; I haven't probation and I'm not on licence or anything like that, so … once I go, I go … I was renting a place but it had to go … that's one thing, I was meant to see the girl from the Housing. I asked to see her nearly four weeks ago and I'm still waiting to see her … when I get out, I have a weekend booked in a hotel but I'll have to use that weekend to look for somewhere temporarily … At the moment, I'm living in a tent by the looks of things when I get out.* (Donna, age 42, pre-release)

Other women described trying to manage this uncertainty by retreating into their home environments in an attempt to insulate themselves from the outside world, which they perceived as hostile and confusing. For many, an effect of their institutionalisation was the loss of self-confidence

needed to manage their everyday affairs. If the impact of custody leads to one feeling disarmed and incapacitated, then it follows that there needs to be greater support offered to women prior to and on leaving custody.

Re-establishing relationships with children

For many women who are imprisoned, it is the first time they have been separated from their children for a significant length of time (Codd, 2008). This separation is described as 'mental torture' (Corston, 2007: 29). Being apart and being concerned about the welfare of their children are among the most damaging aspects of prison for women. The problem is exacerbated by a lack of contact.

Research points to the importance of maintaining positive links between prisoners and their families. NIPS recognises the importance of family ties in supporting social rehabilitation, and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland in its corporate plan (2002–2005), the Northern Ireland Prison Service Resettlement Strategy (2004) and the Children's Services Plans of all Northern Ireland Health and Social Service Boards also note the place of parenting work within the resettlement process; however, there is no statutory agency in Northern Ireland with specific responsibility for children of imprisoned parents.

The majority of women in this sample ($n = 11$) were mothers, five of whom had full-time responsibility for childcare prior to their committal to custody; five women had children who were now adults and one woman had children in care. Time and again in discussion with women, mention was made of the pain and anguish of being parted from their children; in particular, not being able to look after them and share the everyday joys of motherhood.

Feelings of guilt and shame

Feelings of shame and guilt were also features of women's lives as they returned to the community. Some women described how they were unable to cope with the day-to-day challenges of life outside prison. Simple activities such as going to the local town or shop were a cause of stress. This was most acute during the initial weeks on leaving prison; however, for some the shame and stigma did not lessen over time:

> *I didn't want to leave [prison] because I was facing the big bad world I thought. My biggest issue was meeting people, having to try and get on a bus*

myself, having to bump into people myself ... it was as if I had 'prison' wrote on my forehead. (Helen, age 53, three months post-custody)

Evelyn struggled with her label as an offender and recalled her anguish during her first months of custody:

I was unable to physically or mentally function – I just stayed in my cell and cried, I just couldn't come to terms with the fact that I was in prison – me, at this stage in my life. (Evelyn, age 61, pre-release)

The sense of stigma that women experienced as a result of having been in prison was clear in many of their accounts. Women who had no previous convictions and had clear intentions of avoiding further offending were confronted by the impact of stigma and a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). This was evident in how they viewed themselves and how they perceived that others viewed them, particularly within their local communities. This was a consistent theme in nearly all the women's accounts.

It's just ruined my life, you know, my life isn't, it'll never be what it was before. I've lost my own self-respect, you know, so nobody can give that back to me really ...The biggest challenge is trying to be able to go out and about and not feel like as if you have got a sign on top on your head, and I haven't overcome that, not being able to live where I want to live and not being able to organise. That's the biggest challenge and disappointment as well. It's a challenge that I haven't been able to deal with and I'm at other people's mercy at the minute ... it's just my independence taken away and I just don't, don't enjoy life. (Evelyn, age 61, nine months post-custody)

This experience is not unusual for women exiting custody. A study focused on stigma found that on release into the community, women often experience a damaging process, as a consequence of society's labelling as well as the internal mechanisms of self-shaming resulting from embarrassment about having been in prison (Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001). The enduring impacts of shame prolong punishment and lead to isolation and social exclusion, which can place women at risk of further offending (Carlen, 1988; Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001).

Employment

Obtaining stable, meaningful and well-paid employment is an important factor in assisting successful resettlement. Seven women were in employment prior to custody but only six of the women spoke of plans to seek employment on release from custody. Of the 14 women, only three had secured employment in the nine months following release.

This is consistent with recent research published by the Prison Reform Trust (2017) which showed that women were unlikely to secure employment following a period of imprisonment. Similarly, it was clear from the research that imprisonment adversely affected their employment opportunities. Nora, who returned to her job, was laid off one month after her return. The financial impact of this setback was extremely difficult for the family:

> *I was very hopeful when I came home but then everything just broke down, because my previous workplace, they said that they were keeping me and everything, but when I arrived home and I went to the first meeting, they were sorry, but we have to reduce your hours because we have got someone else … but they knew what happen with me, they knew I was not sick.* (Nora, age 36, three months post-custody)

Helen had always worked prior to her imprisonment but had not found employment six months after her release:

> *I've been trying to get a job and stuff. I've put in application forms in but I haven't heard anything back yet, so I haven't, so I'm just hoping to get that. It's just, I have to get some work because bills are just piling in.* (Helen, age 60, six months post-custody)

For Helen, the importance of working was linked to her sense of self-worth. Employment provides the financial means to support families; it provides a sense of identity and purpose, a daily structure and routine and an opportunity to increase one's social network. Helen was unable to secure employment over the nine months, and she believed that her period in prison had made it more difficult for her to get a job.

Jane also spoke, while in custody, of her plans to secure employment. She had lost her job prior to coming into prison but was hopeful of finding a job in due course. Unfortunately, a job was not available to her on her

return. Jane attended programmes with NIACRO and with her Probation Officer. However, she found it difficult to secure employment – not least due to employers' view of her having a criminal record:

> *Definitely a lot harder; I see jobs that I feel I can apply for and then obviously there is always that question, have you a conviction?, and as soon as you declare you have a conviction, no matter how qualified you are for that job that you are obviously down at the bottom of the list … I have applied for a few jobs, I haven't been successful for any of them and I do believe that is because I have disclosed that I have a conviction.* (Jane, age 29, three months post-custody)

Of the six women who spoke of their plans to work, only three secured employment. All were faced with discrimination related to their offending and imprisonment. There was evidence of employers not wishing to employ applicants with a history of offending. Women spoke of their concerns in informing their employers of their convictions and were fearful of the consequences should their employers find out.

Eight of the women did not identify employment as an immediate concern, particularly those who were suffering with mental health difficulties. The two women who were pregnant were not keen to seek employment, mainly because they perceived that the only work available would be short-term and low paid, and that, ultimately, it would reduce their benefits. Women who lived in isolated rural areas also perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage in securing work, and the younger women found that it was not financially feasible to work as they were in receipt of housing and income benefit.

Carlen (1988) recognised that many women perceive themselves as being damaged by their imprisonment and that their criminal record had declared them as unemployable for life. She argued that imprisonment can further narrow already meagre life chances (Carlen, 1988: 137).

The impact of custody beyond the gates

Women described how prison had presented challenges for them, the physical and psychological demands of being locked up, hearing and witnessing other women's distress and dealing with their own thoughts and concerns. Prisons are not safe places (Moore and Scraton, 2009). Women described long-term consequences from having been subject

to pain, deprivation and living in an abnormal setting, interacting with strangers.

Moore and Wahidin (2015) describe the enforced removal of a person's liberty and a citizen's status, and the erosion of personal identity. Haney (2003) notes that the psychological effects of imprisonment can vary from individual to individual, but 'few people are completely unscathed by the experience' (Haney, 2003: 4).

Exiting prison is sometimes classified as the 'end result' – a static experience, an end point in a 'linear process through the criminal justice system' (Carlton and Seagrave, 2013: 8). A key finding of this study is that experience of punishment does not end on release from prison. All women I interviewed during the nine months following their release from custody reported that the memory and experience of being in custody remained with them. The consequences went far beyond the prison gate.

> *Whether you're in a month, two months, a year, you know, it's not something that you can wipe out you know. You've had that experience, you know, you just have to learn by it and … It stays with you.* (Donna, age 42, nine months post-custody)

> *It's with you for life, it's with you for life. You know you can, you'll never lose that.* (Evelyn, age 61, nine months post-custody)

> *You never forget, you never. You try and block it out, but when sometimes you're on your own and you see them four walls you think, you know where I've been, what I've done, it's just an impact on your mind, your life. I hope, and I do hope, that one day, I'll wake up and I'll think 'It's gone.'* (Helen, age 60, nine months post-custody)

The experience of being in prison, no matter what the length of time or, indeed, how they coped with the consequences, did stay with the women throughout the period of study. There is little knowledge as to when such memories fade and women can move on to living their lives beyond prison.

Conclusion

The personal cost of prison was great for women. All the women spoke of the trauma of being in custody, even the few who found some benefits. The overwhelming view was that the period of custody was a wasted time

for them. Women felt marked by the label of imprisonment, and the fact of their being in custody, even for a short time, was a punishment so great that, for some, time could not erase the detrimental effects on their psyche and outlook on life.

It is clear from these accounts that the effects of custody are seen not just in the period of imprisonment but as 'a dynamic process that unfolds over time' (Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2003: 199). These women's journeys reveal the impacts of this 'time after time'.

Notwithstanding the debates as to the function and use of custody, it is important to recognise that women may face particular difficulties when they enter custody that are different to those faced by men. Women tend to commit offences that are acquisitive in nature while men tend to commit more serious, violent crimes and, as a result, a higher proportion of women are in prison for relatively short sentences. This has implications in terms of sentence planning, access to programmes and making the appropriate links with agencies in the community that can assist women in their return into the community.

It was evident from research that those sentenced to short periods of custody did not receive the level of support within custody required to prepare for their return to the community. Women were therefore in more difficult circumstances than they had been prior to their incarceration.

A high proportion of women in this study were first-time offenders and the majority had no previous experience of custody. Most were sentenced to custody for periods of less than eight months, some with a further post-custody licence reflecting the nature of their offence. Their offences were not necessarily violent and they were not assessed as posing a significant risk to others.

Short sentences do little to address the complex needs of women offenders. From the account of the journeys described by the women, they can have detrimental effects in terms of their mental health, family relationships and financial stability.

The salient question is – did they need to make this particular journey, or, to put it another way, did their offending merit a custodial sentence?

It was clear from the women's accounts that their period of imprisonment had had a long-lasting and damaging effect on their lives, affecting their partners, children and other family members. The women acknowledged that they had done wrong, and they acknowledged that they had offended. They did question what purpose their incarceration had served for society.

One of the key purposes of undertaking research as a practitioner funded by a Griffins Fellowship is to effect change in practice. The research report, *Time After Time – A Study of Women's Transitions from Custody*, includes a series of recommendations for improvement and development. Recommendations include that the Department of Justice review the sentencing of women in Northern Ireland and ensure long-term funding for community initiatives that support women leaving custody.

There is a particular need to ensure that appropriate support services provide adequate health care for women on release from custody, particularly in the area of mental health. The provision of adequate accommodation is also a pressing need. As the findings demonstrate, greater emphasis should be placed on the needs of families, particularly children, when women are sent to prison. Specific supports around family contact are recommended.

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