

MARGINALIZED VOICES ON THE CRIMINALIZATION OF WOMEN

Absent Voices: Experiencing Prison Life from Both Sides of the Fence – A Turkish Female’s Perspective *Safak Bozkurt with Andreas Aresti*

Over the last few decades, there has been a significant increase in women’s imprisonment in England and Wales, as evidenced in the dramatic growth in the female prison population. In 1992, the female prison population stood at 1,577. By 2002, just ten years later, it had increased to a staggering 4,299 (Home Office, 2003). Since then, it has remained relatively stable, with the female prison population (in England and Wales) standing at 3,782 as of July 2018 (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Despite this, much of our knowledge and understandings of the prisoner’s experience is based on men’s accounts, privileging male perspective’s and experiences of prison life, and the criminal justice system in general, over that of their female counterparts, despite significant differences between the two (Corston, 2007; Malloch and McIvor, 2011; Owen, 2003). As Owen (2003, p. 236) contends, “just as the lives of women in prison are gendered, so is the study of these worlds”. Consequently, women’s voices are often neglected in this instance, and their experiences are more often than not, interpreted or conceptualized via theoretical frameworks or models based on men’s experiences (ibid).

Importantly, whilst it is argued that first-hand accounts of the lived experience of prison are often absent in the mainstream academic literature (Aresti et al, 2016; Jones et al, 2009; Ross and Richards, 2003), this is particularly the case for women. Indeed, Convict Criminology (CC) has come a long way in promoting the voice of the prisoner, but what appears to be missing in both the mainstream and CC literature, are the voices of marginalised cohorts, in particular, women’s voices and the voices of ethnic minorities (Belknap, 2015; Larsen and Piché, 2011; Owen, 2003). Given that, this paper seeks to address this in-balance by providing a unique, first-hand account of a women’s experience of life in the British penal system. It also seeks to address the on-going issue regarding the absence of marginalised voices in the CC literature, in particular, women’s voices and the voices of ethnic minorities. A full critique of these issues and responses to them can be found elsewhere (Aresti and Darke, 2016; Belknap, 2015; Larsen and Piché, 2011; Owen, 2003).

As an attempt to remedy this, in this paper, the first author, Safak, details her account of prison life and the events leading up to it. She positions herself within the CC framework, and speaks from both a female perspective and as member of a minority ethnic group.

Arguably, whilst it is understandable that much of the research/academic focus has been on men due to their higher representation in the criminal justice system, and in particular prison in comparison to women (Aresti and Darke, 2016) it has of course been detrimental to our understandings of women's experiences. As noted, women experience crime, the criminal justice system and prison in particular, in very different ways to men, often with significantly divergent complexities, struggles and issues (Corston, 2007; Malloch and McIvor, 2011; Owen, 2003). Given this, it is fundamental that we consider the range of such contextual factors when exploring prisoners' experiences.

There is no doubt that women struggle to get through their prison sentences. I (Safak) know because I have lived it and seen it, whilst serving time in prison. I also know because I am in a very unique position. I was also, not too long ago, a prison officer. Certainly, here in the UK, I am one of the first to have such a unique experience, especially when considering the other contextual aspects that I will soon share with you. Arguably, I am in the privileged position of being able provide a perspective from different sides of the fence, a prison officer versus a prisoner. Given this, and having worked in male prisons, I can confidently say that whilst there are clear parallels in male and female experiences of prison, there are some fundamental differences. In her review of women's imprisonment, Baroness Corston (2007) argued that women identify with more complex needs and vulnerabilities than their male counterparts. This is due to a number of gender-based characteristics and because they are serving time in prisons designed for men (Corston, 2007, p. 3). As observed by the voluntary sector organisation, The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) "in a system that has evolved primarily to meet the needs of male prisoners, female prisoners suffer disproportionate hardship as the conditions of confinement tend to be more aversive for them" (Minson et al, 2015, p. 548). Corston (2007, p. 4) reinforces this, identifying some of the everyday practical issues women experience because of this design issue. For example, she pointed out that "it is humiliating for women to be using facilities designed for men particularly during menstruation". Yet, despite the array of issues identified by Corston

(2007) arguably one of the most damaging are the psychological effects of imprisoning women who are mothers. This has severe and devastating consequences for both the children and the imprisoned mother, and yet this is often not considered by penal system authorities or others. Recent estimations illustrate that approximately two-thirds of the women sentenced to a prison term have children under the age of eighteen. Importantly, many of them are the sole carers and when a mother receives a custodial sentence, only five percent of these children are able to stay with family, so many end up in care (Minson, et al, 2015, p. 2). It has been stressed that the disruption such sentences cause to the children's lives are hugely unnecessary. This is particularly the case for short sentences (Moore and Scraton, 2015, p. 550). Despite this, Judges continue to show reluctance in replacing immediate custodial sentences with alternatives (Samuels, 2018).

I have personal experience of this too, because I am a mother of two children. Therefore, considering this together with the other characteristics noted previously, I am in a unique position given my life experiences of the criminal justice system as a prison officer versus prisoner, and a female of Turkish ethnic origin. Moreover, scholarly voices of marginalized cohorts are relatively absent in the mainstream and within the CC network (Belknap, 2015; Larsen and Piché, 2011). I would like to share my story to further our understanding of what it is like for a mother of Turkish origin to serve time in prison.

MY STORY

In 2014, I graduated from The University of Westminster with a BA (Hons) in Criminal Justice. I started looking for work and eventually passed the assessments for a Prison Officer position. I did not have the slightest clue about what I was walking in to, but the thought of having my very first job was exciting. Following 10 weeks of training, I started work as an Officer at HMP/YOI Isis, which was a prison for male offenders between the ages of 18 to 30. While I was settling into the job and doing really well, my relationship with the father of my children, which had been extremely controlling and abusive for 10 years, began getting worse. I was going from supervising approximately 80 male prisoners at work, to being harassed and abused by a male at home, during which time he was involved in criminal activity. I was a year in to my job when I finally found the courage to say enough is enough and let go of him. This, however, left me with piles of debt and no

childcare for me to continue working full-time. While my mental state began deteriorating, I was getting more and more desperate for a way out without seeking help from the man who had broken me. While this was happening, I had a prisoner approach me on several occasions and offer me a lot of money in return for smuggling in illegal items. I rejected his offer as I have always been against drugs, primarily because my brother has been a drug addict since my childhood. However, this prisoner's offer suddenly became appealing when I received a repossession order through the post, as I was struggling to pay the rent. That day I went in to work and approached the prisoner and I accepted his offer, and so began what was going to be hell on earth for me.

The criminal activity lasted approximately 6 months, with more and more prisoners getting involved in this illegal arrangement. The stress of the situation increased for me as I was bringing in illegal items for a number of the men. I eventually got caught with unauthorized articles on 12 July 2016 when returning from lunch. I was stopped and searched upon entrance to the prison. That was the moment I knew my life had changed for the worse and forever! Within a minute I had gone from being a prison officer in a position of power, to a powerless criminal being told to "keep your hands out of your pockets and not to move, otherwise you will be restrained". I was in an absolute state of shock and wanted nothing more than to disappear off the face of earth. After a short wait in the radio room, two detectives came and arrested me. I was taken to Plumstead Police station in London and once booked in, I was strip-searched. That I must say was the most degrading moment of my life. Being stripped out of my officer uniform, suspected of having further items concealed. I was locked in a cell for just under an hour and was then bailed following an interview, a mug shot and my fingerprints taken. What made the whole situation worse was while waiting to be booked in, I heard someone from behind me say, "oi Miss [prisoners call female prison officers Miss] is that you? What you doing here?" I turned around to see a former prisoner from HMP Isis who had been arrested. I froze and felt extremely embarrassed. I tried to ignore him, but he kept asking me questions. However, the custodial officer realized what was going on and immediately locked him in a cell. I knew then that it was never going to get any easier. It is essential to note that "selling drugs when few options for sustainable income are available, puts poor women at even greater risk of incarceration with the current crimes policies, where drugs offences are punished more severely" (Moe and Ferraro, 2007, p. 137).

Of the crimes typically committed by women, drug related crimes (e.g. dealing/trafficking, etc.), like prostitution are typically economically driven. For women that are mothers, their children are often the motivation when committing such economically based crimes (Moe and Ferraro, 2007). “In short, the crimes for which women are most likely to be arrested and incarcerated for, are also those that are best explained by worsening economic and social conditions” (Moe and Ferraro, 2007, p. 137). In parallel with this, Allen and colleagues (2010) argue that the majority of women who are being processed through the courts, are poor single mothers, who have more often than not been involved in non-violent drug-related offences. They further state that “these women, as vulnerable as they are, are often poorly served by the very system that should be helping them” (ibid, p. 161). It is only more recently, during my incarceration that I explicitly realized this, having never worked in a women’s prison. However, I was now beginning to experience how women were treated in the criminal justice system.

I was on bail for just under 10 months and during that period, I signed up for a Master’s degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice and began studying. After having my initial hearings, I was at Court on 24 April 2017 for sentencing. At this point, I was well into my studies and only a few months away from graduating. I had also been successful in my application for a PhD in Criminology, which was due to begin that year. My sentencing judge was a very fair man. When passing my sentence, he took into account my years of victimization prior to my offence, and despite stating that he had no doubt “I could teach a class about crime”, he did mention my efforts to move on from it. Although humorous on reflection, I did feel deeply ashamed. I had gone from being a respected prison officer, working for the state, to being branded a ‘criminal’ for breaking the law and violating social norms. Garfinkle (1956, p. 420) conceptualises this branding as follows: “any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types, will be called a status degradation ceremony”. Reflecting on the experience, it certainly felt like a degradation ceremony!

Nevertheless, the judge acknowledged that this was my first offence and that I was a law-abiding citizen prior to it. He gave me credit for fully cooperating with the investigating officers and for my honesty from the very beginning. He also took into consideration my two young children at home who were fully dependant on me. Although he did mention that

I should have thought about the welfare of my children at the time of the offence, rather than expecting the court to consider this. After an hour's deliberation, he handed me a two-year suspended sentence and a 300-hour community order. The relief was unreal. I burst into tears. I was going home to my children. He gave me another chance and I knew the main reason for this second chance was the children. For some, that was him being lenient, but I believe he was following guidelines and recommendations, and was considering the interests of my children.

There are many examples of this 'leniency'. For instance, the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 3) states that, "non-custodial sentences are preferable for women with dependent children, with custodial sentences to be considered when the offence is serious or violent, or the woman represents a continued danger. Even when that is the case, a custodial sentence should only be given after considering the best interests of the child or children..." (Minson et al, 2015, p. 10). It is argued that the best interests of the children must be a primary consideration when sentencing mother's and the "welfare of the child should be at the forefront of the Judges mind" (ibid, p. 11). However, it has become evident from my personal experience that these principles are generally neglected in courts when dealing with mothers.

During my time in prison, I met many women who had left behind babies as young as 6-weeks old. Others had left young children with many being taken into care. The majority of these women were inside for non-violent, first-time offences. The disruption to the children's lives was certainly unnecessary. For the mothers though, it is argued that incarceration has far-reaching effects, in many cases triggering termination of parental rights and contributing to mental illness (Easterling et al, 2018). Typically, there are collateral consequences for the wider prison population in general, but in relation to mothers, "[there are] additional repercussions of a criminal conviction on an offenders life, as well as those of their dependants" (Bennett, 2017, p. 481). Loss of employment and other developmental opportunities, loss of or lack of access to housing, as well as the problem of stigmatization and labelling not only affect the person convicted, but also affects dependents too.

Travis (2002, p. 16) refers to this as "invisible punishment", that is "the punishment that is accomplished through the diminution of the rights and privileges of citizenship and legal residency". This "points to harms that are

not part of the directly and intentionally-imposed punishment itself, but are rather the foreseeable affect that punishment has on individuals” (Bennet, 2017, p. 482). These are certainly invisible factors, as they do not attract the attention of policy makers and reformers. Moreover, judges do not typically consider these, leaving those convicted of a crime in a more vulnerable position than before. This lack of consideration by judges or reluctance to show any lenience, particularly to mothers when sentencing, is arguably because they fear that “motherhood” will become a “get out of jail free” card (Minson et al, 2015, p. 12).

Yet I question this. Is prison really necessary? The distress I experienced up until that point, as with other women, is certainly misunderstood and not particularly considered by the authorities. From being arrested, to the hours at the police station, the stressful wait during my time on bail, the court appearances and in particular being locked up in that dock, as the defendant was enough punishment for me, especially when considering it was my first time facing such proceedings. It is difficult to express how shameful it was to be dealt with by the police, the courts and probation as an ‘offender’. Arguably, men tend to find it easier to keep their chin up and say “yes, I did it”. As a male committing crime is more socially acceptable, they arguably do not really experience shame or embarrassment to the extent that women do. As Messerschmidt (1993, p. 85) observes in his analysis of gender and crime, “crime is a resource for doing masculinity in specific social settings...”, and certainly this applies to both inside the prison walls and beyond. Crime is a way of achieving masculinity, power and status by males, who have not the opportunities to achieve these in more legitimate and conventional ways.

It is totally different for a woman. Of course, this is a broad generalization and contextual factors need to be considered for men as well (e.g. type of offence, whether they are first time ‘offenders’, etc.), however, it is well documented that the stigma of a criminal conviction is much worse for women. This is because they are believed to have broken not only the criminal law, but also social norms, and are additionally stigmatized for breaking gendered “codes” of appropriate behaviour for women (Malloch and McIvor, 2011, p. 331).

Nevertheless, my suspended sentence was not good enough for the authorities. Ten days after my court appearance and ten hours into my community order, I received a letter through the post stating that the

Attorney General had appealed the sentence on the basis that it was “unduly lenient” and three weeks after that I found myself sitting in front of three judges at the Court of Appeal. I was back to square one. These judges were very harsh and did not take any mitigation into account. They did not even want to see my file, which the initial Judge had taken the time to read through. It appeared from the beginning of the hearing that the decision had already been made. I remember very clearly the judge stating, “we give leave for appeal, now in terms of length of sentence...”, and I could not hear or understand the rest. I felt weak at my knees and my head was spinning. Everything in the courtroom suddenly became a blur and I just about heard two years eight months. I felt like I was about to collapse. Once I saw Serco officers, who are responsible for court to prison transportation services, walk in, I realized it was all too real and told my barrister to ask for time straight away. I had two young children at home and parents who were about to board a plane to go Turkey. Luckily the judges agreed to allow me four days at home to sort everything out and told me to surrender myself to the local police station on 26 June, a Monday.

This was a huge shock for me and whilst I had prepared myself for a custodial sentence when attending Crown court, I was confident this time round that the decision would not change. One major reason for my confidence was the interesting case of a 21-year-old female prison officer, who had been charged and sentenced approximately six months before me. She had engaged in a relationship with a male prisoner serving a life sentence at the category ‘A’ prison (high security) in which she worked. She was caught and charged with two counts of misconduct in a public office, conveying prohibited articles into a prison and possession of cannabis. Analysis of her mobile phone showed they had also exchanged 500 messages with some being sexual. She was handed a 12-month custodial sentence, suspended for two years and ordered to complete 300 hours of community work. This was then appealed by the Attorney General and referred to the Court of Appeal. However, the judges at the court dismissed the appeal, with a judge stating that, “Youngman’s mitigation justified the Crown Court Judges decision not to jail her. She was very young and had been left working alone on a category ‘A’ wing (high security wing) overnight after only six weeks of training. She was in a vulnerable position and having given into his requests once, she was in a hopeless situation, trapped by a lifer with nothing more to lose”. In defence of the Crown Court Judge, the appeal Judge went on to

say that, “The result of his reasoning might be described by some as lenient, but it is equally describable as wise, long-sighted and brave” (Savva, 2016). It is clear from the judge’s speech that the defendant was to some extent, made out to be the victim in this case. Her only mitigation was her age and that she had fallen in love with a prisoner!

In stark contrast to this, during my second appearance at the appeal court, I was portrayed as being a “greedy criminal”. The final speech made by the judges sentencing me was as follows:

The offending here was serious; it was done for venal motives. The offender should have thought about the consequences. With respect to the Judge (original sentencing judge), we are driven to the conclusion that the sentence was not only lenient, but also unduly lenient and cannot stand. While impact on children is important, parenthood cannot be used as a trump card to avoid jail (Kirk, 2017).

Some may argue that this is a fair statement, but something has been bothering me since learning of this case. I must stress again that I am of Turkish origin, in comparison, the other female convict that I mention is white British. Whilst this may not mean anything and is in no way a certainty, I believe from my personal experience that this was an example of how ethnic minorities are treated differently when being dealt with by the criminal justice system. Although my barrister put this young women’s case forward, the judges took no notice of it and chose not to refer to it at all. I will never know if ethnic origin played a part in me being given a custodial sentence, but certainly the racial disparities are clearly evident in the existing literature when it comes to the mistreatment and discrimination of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system, in comparison to their white counterparts (see Jacobson et al, 2010; Webster, 2007). For some authors, these racial disparities reveal much wider ideological and structural issues. Saleh-Hannah (2017, p. 420) argues that the mass incarceration of ethnic minorities serves to maintain a Racist-Imperialist-Patriarchy. In short, the mass criminalisation of ethnic minorities serves to maintain the current status quo, keeping the privileged white supremacists in power, while oppressing the ‘inferior’, powerless and diverse minority ethnic cohorts. Even if in my instance, this was not done consciously, arguably such biases are woven into the fabric of society’s consciousness, and reinforced by

dominant discourses, ideological frameworks and mainstream institutions (ibid). This is covered in more detail by Paula Harriot (this volume).

Putting this aside, what is particularly infuriating, is that I became aware that my suspended sentence had caused public outrage and had caught the attention of the Shipley MP (Member of Parliament), Mr. Philip Davies. Upon reading my story in the news, he had taken it upon himself to ensure my sentence was immediately appealed and had requested the sentence to be overturned. He had argued that my suspended sentence was “unduly lenient” and believed that if it was a male in my position he would have been given a custodial sentence straight away. He was appalled at the fact that the judge had taken my children into consideration and treated me differently to that of a male defendant. He believed that gender should not be of any importance when sentencing an ‘offender’ and his understanding of equality was that similar sentences should be passed for similar crimes regardless of gender, mitigation, responsibilities, and the like. That of course is open for debate. Corston (2007, p. 2) states that “men and women are different and equal treatment of men and women would not result in equal outcomes”. She goes on to argue that equality must embrace not just fairness, but also inclusivity, and that a different and distinct approach is needed for women.

In this instance, it is also necessary to consider the “principle of equal impact” (Roberts and Watson, 2017, p. 549). This principle is derived from the notion of “equality before the law” and has focused on the impact being equal, not the sentences in relation to male and female offenders. This is an important point that needs to be considered by every judge when passing sentences to women, because it will promote fairness and ensure one gender is not discriminated against. For example, a five-year sentence for a male could just be “bird” (slang for doing time), but it would be the beginning of many issues for a woman, such as losing her children and her home, as well as manifesting with a range of mental health issues, that can lead to them self-harming (Corston, 2007). Relative to this, and the notion of “equality of impact”, “Women prisoners are far more likely, in comparison to men, to be primary carers of young children and this factor makes the prison experience significantly different for women” (Corston, 2007, p. 3). Nevertheless, Mr. Davies, our friendly and righteous Shipley MP, was extremely pleased with the final outcome. He stated that he was delighted that the court of appeal judges had overturned my original sentence, and

the country's top judges agreed with him in relation to the sentence being unduly lenient (Kirk, 2017).

The four days before I surrendered were no different to watching your own funeral. I was sorting out paperwork and calling relevant authorities to have my mum take over the childcare and my home while I was away, as well as packing my bags. Whilst also trying to prepare my children for the Monday evening and the year that lay ahead from that evening onwards. Alongside this, I was also trying to mentally prepare myself for prison. I knew exactly what I was walking into, but this time, I was going to be on the other side of the fence. What was it going to be like? On that Monday morning, I dropped my children off to school for the last time. Watching them walk away made my heart ache. I would not see that moment again for at least a year. The guilt I felt was unexplainable. I was struggling to breathe. They were both crying while walking away. I had told them I would be gone for a while, and that they would have to come and visit me instead. The pain in my children's eyes when saying goodbye made everyone cry.

I thought about the effects of my imprisonment on the children, and how even though my custodial sentence was relatively short, the impact would be devastating and long-lasting. Corston (2007) has observed that even for women serving short sentences, for minor offences, imprisonment brings chaos and disruption to their lives and families, without any realistic chance of addressing the cause of their criminality. Although my offence was not so minor as I had abused a position of trust, I was not a violent criminal. It was my first offence. I was in a huge financial mess and had suffered years of domestic abuse, which had left me mentally unstable. The question I constantly asked myself was, "what would a prison sentence do other than disrupt the lives of my children. How would twelve to sixteen months of being behind the door, help me address the fifteen years of struggle?" Would I not have benefited more from support from the relevant agencies and alternatives to incarceration?

After breathing in plenty of fresh air, I walked into my local police station at 12 pm on that Monday afternoon. I handed over my liberty and any control I had over my life. I was now beginning a tough journey. As soon as I was booked into custody, I was told I would be going to HMP Bronzefield. Bronzefield is a category 'A' prison, the highest security prison for women. It holds a huge variety of prisoners, including lifers, short and medium sentenced prisoners, those on remand, young adults, and mothers

and babies. Once I was told where I was going, a nurse saw me. I had not slept since I was sentenced or eaten anything. I felt very faint, tired and sick. I was in such a bad way that the officers treated me more like a patient than an ‘offender’. I looked and felt too vulnerable! I was locked in a cell for two hours and then Serco, the prison transportation agents, arrived. They took me out of the cell, put me in handcuffs and walked me out to the van. I felt so ashamed! I remembered the times I took prisoners out on hospital escorts and was cuffed to them. I wanted the ground to bury me. I could not stop looking at the handcuffs around my wrists. Reality kicked in. I had no control over what was to happen in my life in the next year or so. After a painful six hours in the Serco van, myself and four other women, were picked up from courts and arrived at HMP Bronzefield. Once off the bus or “sweat box”, as they are more aptly known, my photo was taken, a prison number was issued and I was given an ID card. The ID card that I, as an officer, used to ask prisoners for. I would now walk around with it. That was my new identity. A number. I was now known as A6435DZ!

I was locked in the waiting room and once all booking was done I was escorted onto the house block. It did not feel real. Walking along with an officer, carrying a first night bag. I was unable to process my surroundings. The inside of the house block looked the same as the one where I had worked with a hub in the middle, surrounded by four wings. I could not believe the situation I was in. The officer escorted me on to the induction wing and locked me up in a single cell. I dropped the bag and looked around the cell, it was identical to the ones I used to lock prisoners in. What the hell had I done! This was now my reality. I felt weak. I was going to be locked behind this door every day for the next year. I had lost sight of my children. The pain was unbearable, it was physical and I was aching all over. I had to take deep breaths and calm myself down.

As noted, prisons are harsher for women, particularly because they are made to live in conditions designed for men (Corston, 2007; Easterling et al, 2018; Minson et al, 2015). However, the experience of imprisonment becomes even more difficult when the individual is a mother who has had to leave her child or children behind. It is imperative to understand that motherhood is “an important experience in the life of females, and the experience of being an imprisoned mother can be especially traumatic” (Kutuk et al, 2018, p. 1). On this point, Easterling and colleagues (2018,

p. 16) note that, “imprisonment, besides its other harms, provokes a sense of ambiguous loss among mothers experiencing separation from both their children and their role as mothers”. This of course applies more significantly to children as well, particularly as almost 18,000 children a year are separated from their mothers due to imprisonment (Corston, 2007) and the forced separation is argued to have profound long-term implications for them (Moore and Scraton, 2015). Going back to my situation though, in a way, I felt safe. I was completely free from the abuse of my ex-partner.

The next few days were difficult because I had to adjust to being a prisoner. I had to ignore alarm bells as it was not my job to respond to them anymore. I had to go out to the exercise yard and walk around instead of supervise. At the same time though, it was easy too. I knew the regime. I knew exactly what to expect and what was expected of me. Certainly, being on the other side of the fence was initially a shock, and a typical response that many prisoners experience when entering the prison system (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) although my experience had prepared me in many ways, so adapting to the prison culture (*ibid*) and accepting my situation whilst difficult, was easier than for others I imagine.

The whole place was a world of its own. I found women to be quite different compared to men though. They were more emotionally supportive of each other. They were more giving and welcoming. From my experience as an officer, there would always be tension on the wing when a new prisoner arrived. The issues of gangs and ‘postcode wars’ (turf wars) were present. I would always look around and wait to see if a fight would break out. That was not the case with women. I was, however, surrounded by all sorts, from people with drug/alcohol addictions to lifers, those with mental health issues, murderers, paedophiles and of course many ‘petty criminals’ serving very short sentences.

Regardless of the offence type though, it was clear that many of the women were suffering in many ways. Ginn (2013, p. 22) argues that “women find prison more distressing than men and suffer disproportionately”. This often manifests itself through self-abuse. The rates of self-harm are ten times higher among female prisoners in comparison to that of their male counterparts (Hawton et al, 2014) and death by suicide is said to be more common in female establishments (Ginn, 2013). Females are also more

often “vulnerable to sexual abuse and assault, including exploitation by male guards” (Moore and Scraton, 2015, p. 556)

Bronzefield was a huge mix. I did not come across safer custody (a wing for the vulnerable who are meant to be kept separate from the rest of the prison population) and the detox wing was too overcrowded to have all the recovering addicts in one place. This is due to the “limited number of female prison estates being available, which results in a complex mix of prisoners being housed under the same roof” (Ginn, 2018, p. 22). The 2010 HMIP inspection states that many women are imprisoned far from their homes, creating a significant barrier to family contact. Limited in number, each prison accommodates a complex mix of prisoners, this of course, makes it difficult for prison staff to address needs and deal with prisoners accordingly. For example, in the few days I spent at Bronzefield, my cell was above that of the infamous Joanne Dennehey who had killed several people over the years. She is serving life without parole for the murders of five men and has absolutely nothing to lose. I, along with other prisoners of a wide mix, had to eat at the same table and use the same showers as her. The question to raise here, is whether it is safe to be around women with that experience, in such a confined space. But of course, prison lacks the space and the resources to house people accordingly and provide the relevant support for each individual. The priority there was feeding everyone and locking them up every evening, free of any issues or difficulties. Especially when considering that new receptions (i.e. new arrivals) were being booked in daily.

I would never have imagined so many women would get custodial sentences until I witnessed how busy the induction wing was. It is argued that despite Corston’s (2007) recommendations and custodial alternatives, including 55 projects supporting criminalized women, there has been minimal reduction in women’s imprisonment (Nadin and Earle, 2013).

Overall though, there was no control over the place. One officer did not have a clue what the other was doing. Half the time women were walking around off the wing unsupervised. Cell bells were not answered for hours and nothing was ever done on time. I was particularly amazed at how easily drugs were obtained. Every type of drug you could ask for was available, at a price of course. One prisoner told me it was coming through visits and a few officers, and she said that money was not really a problem because

officers were willing to give it away in return for sexual favours. Here, we may note a study conducted by Crewe (2005) in prisons on drug use. The conclusion was that “drug taking and dealing were accepted by officers and prisoners as inevitable, almost banal, features of the inmate world” (Crewe, 2005, p. 461). He states that drugs are accessed through various ways including visits, and remand prisoners who go out to court. They are thrown over the wall or fence, with the use of a drone and most importantly through corrupt staff who can be “blackmailed into importing larger or more varied quantities of contraband once they have agreed to a first transaction” (Crewe, 2005, p. 465) – an experience that of course resonates with me.

On my fifth day at Bronzefield, my mum, dad and children visited me. I was taken to the visits hall. A hall similar to the one I used to walk around during visits. Every time I looked up at the officers sitting behind the desk, I just could not believe the situation I was in. It was such a thin line and I had crossed it. I was now sitting on the seat and looking at the door. It was a crazy feeling, one I could not put into words. Seeing my children walk through the door was surreal. They came running towards me, both bursting into tears, painful tears. It was damaging. My daughter wanted me to take her to the toilet. I could not get up. I had to stay seated. She just could not make sense of it all. My parents could not either. How shameful it was to go from having them sit through my Prison Officer Graduation ceremony two years previous to this, me sitting in the visits hall of a prison two years on. When the visit was over, my mum had to pull my daughter off me. She put up a fight and was screaming for me. The emotions at that moment, for a mother, are hard to explain. It was soul destroying. There were also many other women like me in that hall. Young kids being forced out and the mothers sitting behind helplessly, crying. It is a disruption to so many lives and something Beck and colleagues (2008) have articulated in their work on prison visitation. Whilst the benefits of prison visits are countless, the negatives are insurmountable. As these authors note, prisoners grieve for their families on a daily basis, they feel shame over their circumstances and experience many restrictions in the visiting context (*ibid*). This particularly resonates with me given my experience of family visits outlined above.

The next day, I was told I would be transferring to HMP East Sutton Park, as I had been categorized as eligible for open conditions (open prison). I had no idea how open conditions were. I was yet to find out that this would

become a blessing in disguise. I was transferred to HMP East Sutton Park on my tenth day, something I had never witnessed in a male prison. Male prisoners had to work towards a D category prison (open prison) and some never reached that stage, but I was sent there straight away. I was happy to an extent, but this also made me angry. If I was such low risk why was I in there in the first place?

On the day of transfer and once arriving at East Sutton Park, I got off the Serco van and walked in to reception. There were no iron gates or locked doors. I felt the embarrassment all over again. I knew that the officer booking me in knew exactly why I was there. I did my best to avoid eye contact at all times. However, the whole environment was very different to the prisons 'we' would know. It was a 'house' and we were 'residents'. The words prison and prisoners was not used. I was greeted with humane treatment. Offered proper food and refreshments.

East Sutton Park housed 100 residents in total. You had an 'offender' supervisor, a personal officer and a case administrator assigned to you. All these people were approachable and did everything they could to help you get back up on your feet. The whole experience was different. I served 11 months at HMP East Sutton Park and can confidently say I walked out as a new person. The women there are supported with absolutely everything and are fully prepared for release. Unfortunately, there are only two open prisons for women with 200 spaces in total, compared to the 3,877 women in custody. Corston (2007) argues that more needs to be done to keep women, who pose no risk to society, out of prison. However, for those where custody is inevitable, the recommendation was the replacement of existing female establishments with more "suitable, geographically dispersed, small, multi – functional custodial centres" (Corston, 2007, p. 5). It is fair to say that in my experience, East Sutton Park is an excellent example of this, but it unfortunately stands alone and is extremely limited with spaces.

MY CARCERAL PRESENT AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

I was released from HMP East Sutton Park on 15 June 2018 on Home Detention Curfew (HDC). This is early release on good behaviour, where an electronic tag monitor is fitted to your ankle and you have curfew hours.

The hours are from 7 pm in the evening until 7 am the next morning. Within those hours I cannot, unless in an emergency, leave my flat for any reason. Despite these restrictions, it feels wonderful being back at home with my children. I am able to cherish every moment I have with them and be a mother again!

HDC serves to benefit the individual in many instances, and as noted above, it has done in my case. Although on a broader level, it is part of a net-widening process that serves to provide alternatives to incarceration while extending control over a larger number of people by the criminal justice system. Although such net-widening programs were intended to reduce the numbers of offenders in prison, amongst other things, net-widening has resulted in a dramatic growth in the total number of ‘offenders’ under state control (Cohen, 1985).

As mentioned, when being sentenced I was in the middle of studying towards a Master’s degree. This was put on hold for me and has now been reinstated. I am now finishing that degree and in the process of applying for a PhD. I have been offered a place at the University of Westminster as well as elsewhere, but I would like to go to Westminster, because I want to continue my academic work and career from a CC perspective. I am aware that at this university, there is a growing body of people in prison wanting to go there to do a degree or PhD in Criminology. They currently have two serving prisoners doing a Criminology degree (they are in open conditions).

I want to contribute my knowledge of the realities of prison life. Moreover, I want to provide a voice for people like me, specifically, women and ethnic minorities, given that they are a marginalized and often absent voice in the academic literature. And whilst my experience of the penal system and prison was horrendous, as articulated to some extent in my story above, some good has come out of this. I have experienced a lot and learnt a lot too. Given this, I want to contribute because as Comack (1999, p. 296) states, “the voices of women behind bars have far too long been silenced, it is time we begin to listen to what they have to say”. Hence, I want to use this knowledge positively by continuing to produce work that privileges the voice of the marginalized via their stories.

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