The impact of imprisonment on women

Studies on the particular characteristics and needs of women offenders (Cabinet Office: Social Exclusion Task Force, 2009; Corston Report, 2007; Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System, 2009; Women’s Justice Taskforce, 2011) have advocated a sentencing approach which acknowledges differences between the male and female sentenced populations and the differing consequential outcomes upon them. The most significant gendered variation is that a greater number of women than men in prison have been the primary caregivers for a child or children prior to their sentence. As women are one of the fastest growing populations within the prison estate, by inference, an ever-increasing number of children are affected by the imprisonment of their primary carer. Between 1995 and 2010, the female prison population more than doubled, from 1,979 to 4,236 (Ministry of Justice, 2014, Table A1.2 Offender Management Statistics Annual Tables 2013), and there was a general increase in the numbers of women sentenced for all offences, rising from 258,600 in 2002 to 299,117 in 2011 (Ministry of Justice, 2012; Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2011). This increase has taken place despite no corresponding increase in the volume or seriousness of female offending.

Using Gresham Sykes’ 1958 ‘pains of imprisonment’ analysis, women suffer the loss of liberty, loss of possessions and loss of autonomy (Genders and Player, 1987, p. 168). Women feel the loss of liberty in the loss of relationships (ibid., p. 170), and as 66% of imprisoned women are mothers of children under 18 (Liebling, 2005, p. 159), many of those are relationships with children. Of those women, 34% have children under 5 and a further 40% have children aged between 5 and 10. The
Social Exclusion Unit report found that women often have no opportunity to discuss how they are going to address childcare issues before they are taken to prison (SEU 2002, p. 112) and the consequence of this on women and children is severe. This contrasts with fathers, whose children are in most cases cared for in the family home by the mother during the period of imprisonment (Gampell, 2003 in Mills and Codd, 2007, p. 686). Additionally, it is difficult for women to receive visits from their children (SEU, 2002), as on average one in five women are placed more than 100 miles from their home (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2009 p. 18). It has been reported that only half of the women who had lived, or were in contact with, their children prior to imprisonment had received a visit since going to prison (SEU, 2002 in PRT, 2010, p. 21). This combination of being held at a significant distance from home and the lack of family / parent carers, does not affect men to the same extent. A third of these mothers are single parents (SEU, 2002, p. 137); only 9% of those children are cared for by their fathers during their mother’s imprisonment (Corston, 2007, p. 20), and only 5% remain in the family home (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Out of 1400 women serving a first sentence in Holloway prison, 42 did not know who was looking after their children (Corston, 2007, p. 16).

Loss of possessions, particularly home and property, affects women more than men, as most men have a female who takes care of their property and possessions while they are in prison (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002, p. 104; Corston, 2007, p. 21). Housing benefits stop at sentence if a prisoner is going to be in prison for more than 13 weeks, so properties are repossessed whilst women are serving their sentence, and often the possessions found at the house are destroyed. Women come out to find themselves ‘intentionally homeless’ with no personal possessions (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002, p. 98). If children have been taken into local authority care, they will not be returned to the mother until she has suitable housing, and without children she is not prioritised (ibid., p. 104). Housing can also be lost because of poor communication with landlords, and this is more likely to affect women, as they are held further away from their homes (ibid.). Both Dobash and Genders suggested that loss of autonomy is felt in both the areas outlined above as women are powerless to make arrangements about these key areas of their lives and are dependent on others to make arrangements on their behalf. There is a fundamental conflict in the approach to incarcerated women in the expectation that they will use their period of imprisonment to take responsibility and yet the level of control prohibits them from having sufficient autonomy.