8 June 2021

Traumatising the Traumatised: Self-Harm and Death in Women's Prisons in England and Wales

Kym Atkinson, Helen Monk and Joe Sim

Introduction

> Women who end up in prison are among the most powerless and disadvantaged in our society, largely due to traumatic life experiences such as sexual and physical abuse, mental and physical ill health, racism and discrimination, underpinned by poverty and inequality (INQUEST, 2019: no page number).

The dominant discourses surrounding self-harm and death in women's prisons, disseminated through an interlinking, deeply patriarchal, network of state, media, liberal reform groups and academic power structures, have socially constructed a particular 'truth' through portraying these profoundly social phenomena in individualistic, pathological terms either as a 'cry for help' or as a result of 'unfortunate' bureaucratic failure, or a combination of both. This chapter is concerned with utlising feminist methodology and theory to critique this dominant 'truth' and to illustrate how such apparently 'deviant' behaviour can be understood not as a cry *for* help but as a rage *against* the specific pain that women prisoners experience through being exposed to psychologically withering prison regimes. These regimes reflect, reinforce and reproduce the decimating experiences that the majority of women in prison also encounter on the outside.

The chapter is divided into four parts[i]. First, it provides a critical overview of the data concerning harm and deaths in women's prisons. Second, it considers how a feminist epistemology, built on 'feminist praxis' can be used to 'unsilence' the voices of women in prison, and their families, and place their experiences directly at the centre of knowledge production (Stanley, 1990). This praxis is not simply about focusing on what kind of knowledge is being produced but, crucially, Stanley asks, what is this knowledge for? For her, '[s]uccinctly the point is to change the world, not only to study it' (ibid, p.15). Third, it develops a feminist, theoretical perspective in order to critically conceptualise the nature of life and death in women's prisons. Finally, the chapter outlines a number of feminist-based strategies and interventions for the prevention and elimination of self-harm and deaths inside. These

strategies can also contribute to the radical transformation in, and eventual abolition of, a pain-inducing institution which has been endlessly critiqued for its abject failure to live up to its own self-serving rhetoric for the last two hundred years (Foucault, 1979).

Gender, Self-Harm and Death

Self-harm and death, and the *potential* for self-harm and death, stalk the prison. This means that *all* prisoners, not the 'pathological' few, are at risk at any point during their sentence. In 2015, there were:

> ….ten times more self-inflicted deaths per 1000 people in custody than there were suicides per 1000 people in the community. Men in prison were six times more likely to take their own life than men in the community, and women in prison were 24 times more likely to take their own life than women in the community (National Audit Office, 2017, p.15).

According to the charity INQUEST, between 2011 and April 2021, there were 96 deaths in women's prisons, 37 of which were self-inflicted. Six transgender women killed themselves in men's prisons between 2013 and 2018 (inquest.org.uk).

In 2018/19, 11 women died in prison, up from 8 in the previous year. Three of these deaths were self-inflicted. The remaining five resulted from 'natural' causes (Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, 2019 p. 57). However, the idea of a 'natural' death in prison is extremely problematic, given the operationalisation of power inside. For INQUEST, 'no death in prison is natural' as the 'failure to treat prisoners with decency, humanity and compassion is a "consistent feature" of deaths [inside]' (INQUEST, cited in Sim, 2019a).

In mid-October 2019, Caria Hart became the 109th woman to die since 2007 the year when the Corston Report called for radical change in women's prisons and the criminal justice response more generally (Taylor, 2019). Caria's death followed the death of a newborn baby in September 2019 in the privately-run Bronzefeld prison, Europe's largest female prison. The baby's mother had given birth overnight when she was alone in her cell. Over the previous two years, there had been another four cases where women had 'given birth in distressing and potentially unsafe circumstances, including one woman who gave birth in her cell and another who was left in labour at night-time supported only by another pregnant prisoner' (Devlin and Taylor, 2019).

According to the charity *Women in Prison:*

> This is not the first time a tragedy like this has happened, and it certainly won't be the last without urgent action. The government can't even tell us how many women in prison are pregnant and how many babies are born in prison. At the very least they need to publish this data, but the real question is why pregnant mothers are in prisons at all (*The Guardian,* 9 October 2019).

In January 2016, Sarah Reed suffered a 'harrowing' death in Holloway ((INQUEST, 2019 p. 10). Sarah's death provides a chilling case study of the harms that prison can do to women who have already been harmed, traumatised and numbed by their pre-prison experiences. Her baby daughter had died suddenly in 2003. She and her partner were told to take a taxi home, with the baby's dead body, to find an undertaker. Her child's death, and the desperately callous response to it, seriously impacted on her mental health. In 2012, she was beaten so severely by a male, police officer (who was given a community service order and sacked from the force) that two of her ribs were broken. Three years later:

> The convergence and intersectionality of Sarah's race, gender and mental health vulnerability combined in a vortex of race discrimination and institutional indifference. In late 2015, while in a secure mental health ward, Sarah claimed that an elderly male patient tried to sexually assault her. She defended herself, was restrained and subsequently arrested, and on 14 October was placed on remand, at the direction of the magistrate, solely for the purposes of obtaining psychiatric reports assessing her fitness to plead (Jasper, 2017).

In prison:

> She was sleepless, hallucinating, chanting, and without the medication she had relied on for years. Much of her behaviour was interpreted by prison staff as a discipline issue. Sarah was put on a basic regime and denied visits from family and lawyers, despite her right to visits as a remand prisoner. Sarah was put on 'four man unlock' and a screen was placed before her cell door. Sarah was found lying in her bed with a tight ligature around her neck and could not be resuscitated. The jury at the inquest concluded that unacceptable delays in psychiatric assessment, inadequate treatment for her high levels of distress, and the failure of prison

psychiatrists to manage Sarah's medication contributed to her death. Marilyn, Sarah's mother, believed Sarah was a victim of collective failure of those involved in her care (INQUEST, 2019 p. 10).

In terms of self-harm, in the 12 months to September 2020, there were 58,870 incidents in men's and women's prisons – 161 each day. There was an 8% increase in women's prisons. In the three months up to September 2020, 'there were 14,167 self-harm incidents, *up* 9% on the previous quarter, comprising a 5% *increase* in male establishments and a 24% *increase* in female establishments' (Ministry of Justice, 2021 p. 1, emphasis in the original). Self-harm is highly gendered:

> The rate of incidents, which takes population size in to account, was 595 incidents per 1,000 prisoners in the male estate in the 12 months to September 2020, down 6% from 635 incidents per 1,000 prisoners in the 12 months to September 2019. *The rate of incidents in female establishments was far higher, and increased by 18%, from 3,016 in the previous 12 months to 3,557 in the latest 12 months* (ibid p. 4, emphasis added).

According to the Chief Inspector of Prisons, the lockdown generated by COVID-19 had resulted in incidents of self-harm increasing to 'unprecedented levels for women' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021 p. 11).

And when they do self-harm, women prisoners can experience further punishment:

> [r]epressive prison regimes impose punishments on women for self-harming. Suicidal women are often segregated and isolated, facing long hours locked up in cells. Inadequate drug detoxification, failing healthcare and lack of therapeutic strategies all contribute to the systemic neglect of women's physical and mental health (Coles cited in INQUEST, 2019 p. 8).

Death also follows women who have been placed under community supervision. In 2018/19, 147 women died, 13% of all deaths for the year. Thirty four per cent of the deaths were self-inflicted which was the highest category followed by 'natural causes' which accounted for 22% of the deaths (Ministry of Justice, 2019 pp. 5-6). However, like prisons, the idea of a 'natural' death in the community is also problematic given the material conditions into which women are released: **'with just £46, a**

plastic bag, nowhere to live and the threat of a return to custody if they miss their probation appointment' (Prison Reform Trust, 2020: Press Release). In other words, 'they continue to be governed by practices that worsen their marginalisation' (Kendall, 2013 p. 48). Psychologically, their subjectivities are also constrained:

> by a risk management discourse that defines them as being perpetually at risk of reoffending, and psy-science practices (such as psychology, psychiatry and social work) that construct them as being psychologically, behaviourally, morally and cognitively flawed (ibid).

Women, therefore, experience specific forms of 'social death' inside and outside of the prison (Price, 2015) which are generated by their structural location on the bottom rung of a gendered ladder of power which generates a 'lifetime experience of harm' (Pantazis, 2004 p. 215).

Death for women extends across the criminal justice system. This is graphically illustrated by women killed by men who were under probation supervision. In the case of Quyen Ngoc Nguyen, the inquest jury found that the system for public protection was 'dysfunctional' and that she was unlawfully killed. The failure by the West Midlands Police and the National Probation Service to take action in Lisa Skidmore's case contributed to her homicide. Her killer had indicated to these services that he was a risk. Despite this, as INQUEST noted:

> The shocking death of Lisa Skidmore was preventable and the direct result of a failing criminal justice system. Warnings about physical and sexual violence to women were ignored by both the probation and the police service. This inquest has performed a vital function of enabling proper public scrutiny and identifying systemic failings. This must result in real change. *This is not an isolated case and until violence against women is taken seriously by authorities the deaths will continue*. This cannot be allowed to happen (INQUEST: no date, emphasis added).

A Feminist Methodology of Self-Harm and Death

Over the past four decades, feminist based, grassroots, activist organisations and charities - *Women in Prison, Women in Special Hospitals and INQUEST* - have been pivotal in creating a space for the experiences and the voices of women detained in different state

institutions to be recognized and heard. No longer hidden in the desolate shadows of these institutions, they have been reclaimed as full, agentic human beings who give meaning to their lives *and* deaths. The process of acknowledging these experiences, and hearing these voices, as well as the experiences and voices of their families, has been crucial because *not* being heard in itself can be understood as a form of trauma-inducing injustice (Stauffer, 2015). In working with bereaved families, INQUEST has sought to:

> …….make visible the women behind the statistics and the structural issues behind their criminalisation and imprisonment. We seek to show the human face of this pernicious social problem, because so many of these deaths are preventable. They raise profound concerns about human rights violations – not only the failure to provide a safe and dignified environment, but also the failure to act to prevent further deaths, an aspiration that unites all bereaved families (INQUEST, 2019 p. 4).

There are two further issues to consider. First, the interventions made by grassroots, activist organizations, and the feminist epistemology which underpins their work, have challenged the state's definition of reality - its 'truth' - regarding the harms the prison engenders which have been masked, hidden and shrouded in a blanket of secrecy. This blanket, while not totally shredded, has been severely torn by these groups through utilizing the psychologically decimating experiences of women detained in state institutions as well as the traumatic experiences of their families to indict the often-mendacious definition of reality propagated by the state, its media acolytes and the politically expedient policies of politicians.

These interventions have generated alternative, critical bodies of knowledge from below. In Foucauldian terms, this process can be understood as 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 2003 p. 7). This insurrection from below has revealed a very different penal and social reality for women far removed from the state's dominant definition of that same reality. As Carol Smart has noted, it is important, to recognize 'the significance of knowledge as power…Knowledge is not something extra…like the icing on a cake, but is synonymous with power, politics and action' (Smart, 1995 p. 216).

Second, these organisations have resisted being incorporated into the regressive machinery of the state and the abject supplication and snake oil professionalization of support services that goes with this incorporation.

In refusing to be both 'defined in' and 'defined out' by the state, and in refusing to use official discourse - such as INQUEST's use of the term 'self-inflicted death' rather than 'suicide' - these groups have carved out a transformative ideological and material space and avoided the pitfall of incorporation, a process which has historically and consistently undermined the prospects for radically changing the immense, and unaccountable, power of the prison to punish (Mathiesen, 1980; Sim, 2009).

In contrast, the often-uncritical support given to therapeutically based interventions, and specific programmes for women in prison individualise and responsibilise them and, consequently, distract attention away from the structural issues confronting them, both inside and outside, which decimate their lives. In that sense, the liberal emphasis on the rehabilitation, reform and reintegration of former prisoners back into 'normal' society is fallacious in that, as Pat Carlen has argued, it fails to consider the structural issues facing former prisoners:

> ... re-integration, re-settlement or re-entry are often used instead of re-habilitation. Yet all of these terms, with their English prefix 're', imply that the law breakers or ex-prisoners, who are to be 're-habilitated'/'re-integrated'/'re-settled' or 're-stored', previously occupied a social state or status to which it is desirable they should be returned. Not so. The majority of prisoners worldwide have, prior to their imprisonment, usually been so economically and/or socially disadvantaged that they have nothing to which they can be advantageously rehabilitated (Carlen, cited in Sim, 2014 p. 21).

Theorising Self-Harm and Death

If women in prison experience their lives as bleak and stunted - what Lisa Stevenson calls the 'poverty and pain of the "now" (Stevenson, 2014 p. 147) - then, following her argument, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths can be understood as a 'response to a future devoid of surprise'. In a fundamental sense, therefore, death and self-harm 'answer[s] in one temporality a question that cannot be posed in another: what if the future cannot redeem the present?' (ibid). Similarly, Jill Stauffer has pointed out that if individuals, 'because of abuse or neglect' are denied the human relationships necessary for self-formation' then this will impact on their psychological capacity 'to take on the present moment freely'. This, she terms, 'ethical loneliness' (Stauffer, 2015 p. 26).

These profound insights can be used to critically analyse the haunting nature of self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in women's prisons. Women prisoners live their lives - or rather attempt to eke out an existence - second by punitive second, in the psychological wasteland of the prison. Each day is predictable and routinized in a system of '*constrained choice*', a concept which captures 'the limited choices available to many marginalised women' who then experience 'cumulative disadvantage rooted in historical and structural forms of inequality that produce oppression, trauma and subsequent harm…the pathways and choices that bring women to prison continue to shape their lives inside (Owen et al, 2017 p. 5, emphasis in the original).

Ex-prisoners are also confronted by the prospect of a future 'devoid of surprise', built on an iron network of intersecting, patriarchal power which, due to its inevitable predictability, is also incapable of 'redeem[ing] the present'. As noted above, this includes homelessness, poverty, and unemployment. Additionally, there is the eternal threat, and direct experience of, male violence,[ii] racist, homophobic and transphobic harms and systemic, unrelenting attacks on their self-esteem underpinned by the remorseless reinforcement of their lack of worth as human beings. The unyielding ache of living wounded lives in soul-crunching conditions outside of the prison does not provide the conditions for positive self-validation, irrespective of the programmes of normalisation the women are exposed to inside the prison with their emphasis on raising individual self-esteem and promoting personal self-worth. As Lynne Haney has noted, programmes for women inside and outside of prisons are based on encouraging a sense of 'dependency', changing 'dangerous desires' and 'replicating a process of disentitlement' (Haney, 2010: pp. 208-209). In short, they are about 'the therapeutics of neoliberalism' (ibid, 225).

According to Stauffer, feeling insecure can be understood as 'the trauma of loss of safety. In particular, it is the loss of the sense the lucky among us have that other human beings will treat us as human beings rather than as objects to be disposed of or abused at will' (Stauffer, 2015 p. 27). Additionally, the behaviour of women in prison can be seen not as pathological responses to a benevolent, empowering, gender-neutral environment but as rational responses at 'managing trauma symptoms' (Owen et al, 2017 p. 64). In that sense:

> Drug use, self-harm, defiance, and other negative behaviors exhibited by women inmates may be better understood as trauma-survival behaviors that alleviate deep sensory distress, rather than a blatant disregard for the institutional rules. Common correctional

routines or practices can worsen or alleviate the sensory distress that accompanies trauma…In the absence of alternatives and living in a climate of fear, [some] behaviors offer a sense of control and psychological and physiological relief (Benedict, cited in ibid pp. 64-5).

Making these links is crucial for challenging the discourse of pathological determinism enveloping women who self-harm or who die in prison - a discourse which is supported by an intersecting, destructive network of patriarchal power dominated by 'judges of [female] normality' (Foucault, 1979 p. 304) - as well lifting the cloak of invisibility and blanket of silence thrown over self-harm and self-inflicted deaths by the state. In short, the traumas women experience on the outside are reinforced and intensified by different state institutions - particularly criminal justice and state welfare institutions - with which they come into contact and which, despite the efforts of some staff who try to work humanely and empathically with them, ultimately reproduce systemic patterns and processes of gendered injustice and inequality.

Given this, self-harm and self-inflicted death can be understood as *rational* responses to intolerable, dehumanising experiences, both inside and outside of prisons. Following Dorothy Smith, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, this behaviour can be understood as women 'actively *constructing,* as well as interpreting, the social processes and social relations which constitute their everyday [penal] realities' (Stanley and Wise, 1990 p. 34, emphasis in the original).

The women's prison experiences can be linked dialectically to broader, structural processes of gender subordination. It is *these* ferocious processes which are pathologically dehumanising, not the individual psychologies and attitudes of the women caught in the pliers of this subordination which denies them their full humanity and reducing them to the belittled, spectral status of abandoned beings which can have a profound impact on their psychological well-being. According to Stauffer, '[b]eing abandoned by those who have the power to help produces a loneliness more profound than simple isolation' (Stauffer, 2015 p. 5). As a place of punishment, and as one element in the continuum of pain that the women have experienced often for the majority of their lives, the prison, in its present form, cannot fulfill their profound yearning to be free of feeling abandoned, and the dissolution of the self that flows from this. In practice, these feelings are endlessly reproduced and reinforced. Like acid, this continuum corrodes the desire

for a stable and meaningful sense of self the women might aspire to, and desire.

Self-harm and deaths can, therefore, be understood as emanating from the jarring dislocations detonated in the subjectivities of women in prison generated by the highly gendered power structure, and the exercise of patriarchal power, operating in, and through, the discourses, policies and practices of heavily masculinised, state institutions. In turn, these institutions reflect and reproduce the toxic cultures of fratriarchy and masculinity deeply inscribed across the political and civil landscape of the wider society.

A Feminist Reckoning with the State

> 'if as a feminist movement we are to truly fight for justice, we must fight for the abolishment of prisons' (Whitcomb, 2017).

How can the destructive processes of patriarchal domination and subordination which provide the context for self-harm and deaths in women's prisons be contested and overturned? The final part of this chapter considers this question through critically exploring a number of feminist-based interventions and strategies designed to radically transform women's prisons and the wider culture and politics of patriarchal power structures within which prisons operate and, to which, as 'insignia of [gendered] power' they provide legitimacy (Tokarezuk, 2019 p. 248).

First, there is the need to confront the binary divide between women in prison and women on the outside. Binaries reinforce socially constructed differences, obfuscate communalities and isolate bodies and minds. In challenging these binaries, the material *similarities* between incarcerated women and women on the outside should be recognised, particularly in terms of the intertwined relationship between harm, protection and safety. For INQUEST, building strategies which respond to these issues, and which link the outside and the inside, should be the starting point for thinking about radically transforming both social spheres:

> Many women in prison have experienced sexual and physical abuse, violence and trauma and have been failed by multiple agencies. There is no clear demarcating line between women as defendants and women as victims or complainants. Self-harm, violence and death experienced by women in custody forms part of a continuum of violence that usually starts in the community and

follows them into, and back out of, prison. *Within this framework, INQUEST perceives imprisonment as a form of state sanctioned violence against women, and part of a cycle of harm that too often leads to trauma, injury and death.* The use of punishment and imprisonment is the result of a lack of political will to take seriously violence against women across society. The imprisonment of women is a matter for everyone - feminists and social justice campaigners alike. Those fighting for gender equality and justice must take seriously the plight of women in prison (INQUEST, 2018 p.19, emphasis added).

INQUEST's argument that prison should be conceptualized as 'a form of state-sanctioned violence against women' has been reflected by anticarceral feminists and, in particular, the need to develop a 'broad and layered understanding of "violence against women" that encompassed the structural violence of social inequalities, the violence of state institutions and agents, and interpersonal forms of violence, including rape, battering and sexual coercion' (Thuma, 2015 p.2).

Second, the links between the macro and the micro exercise of patriarchal power raise significant questions about how safety and protection can be operationalised in the twenty first century, For Lena Palacios, it is important to 'reconceptualise safety in ways that address harm while resisting the vigilantism of "call out culture" and permanent exile as solutions' (cited in Brown, 2020: 78). This would involve putting into practice strategies which ensure safety and protection while directly confronting the question of social harm. In turn, this requires moving beyond 'individualised notions of protection, safety, and by extension safe space' and moving towards a position where 'safety is collective rather than individualized…' This position:

>…..requires an analysis of who or what constitutes a threat and why, and a recognition that those forces maintain their might by being in flux. And among the most transformative visions are those driven less by a fixed goal of safety than by….freedom (cited in ibid).

For Emily Thuma (2019 p. 157), what is needed is 'an antiviolence praxis rooted in an intersectional analysis of oppression'.

Third, as anticarceral feminists have argued, the prison is a highly gendered, *state* institution (Thuma, 2019). To paraphrase Nicola Lacey, it is a site of '[gender] ordering practices' (Lacey, cited in Coleman and

Sim, 2000 p. 629**.** For Raewyn Connell, 'the state is *historically* patriarchal, patriarchal as a matter of concrete social practices…State structures are effectively controlled by men; and they operate with a massive bias towards heterosexual men's interests' (Connell, 1994 p. 163, emphasis in the original). In the context of the role played by these institutions in reproducing a deeply unequal, highly gendered, capitalist, social order, she has asked if 'a feminist state [was] conceivable' (ibid, p. 165). In order to build institutional structures which are, in theory, policy and practice, *feminist*, then the contemporary state would need to be 'replaced by demilitarization and participatory democracy'. Importantly, this development:

> ….would be nugatory unless the cultural distinction which reproduces women's exclusion from state power, the distinction between public (masculinized) and private (feminized) were abolished. In one sense that seems to imply an end to the state as such, which is founded on such a distinction. In another sense it suggests an expansion of the realm to which a programme of democtratization would apply. The state would become, so to speak, broader and thinner (ibid).

The demand to democratise prisons raises a series of questions about the mechanisms of accountability which need to be developed in order to bring the institution under democratic control, including the state agents working within them, whose often-capricious use of their discretionary powers only adds to the distress of the confined. There is a systemic culture of immunity and impunity which has allowed state agents to avoid responsibility for the self-harm and preventable deaths inside. It is an 'accountability void' (Coles and Shaw, no date p. 25). How can this void be challenged and what structures can be put in place so that those responsible for women's deaths are held accountable while simultaneously ensuring that future deaths are prevented and eventually eliminated?

Fourth, these strategies plug into the more general question of abolishing women's prisons. They epitomise the point made earlier in this chapter by Liz Stanley concerning the relationship between knowledge production and radical social change - in this case, radical, penal change - and can be understood as feminist stepping stones towards the abolition of women's prisons in their current, repressive form. They are examples of 'feminist [penal] praxis' designed both to *prevent* and *eliminate* prison harms and deaths through focusing on safety and protection for women in prison while strategically linking this praxis to wider feminist campaigns around

women's safety outside of the prison and, ultimately, contributing to the abolition of women's prisons. This link is crucial in contesting the material and ideological isolation of imprisoned women from mainstream feminist politics, and politics more generally. If fat was, and is, a feminist issue so too are the desperate harms, and ignominious deaths, suffered by women in prison.

In 1990, Pat Carlen argued for the development of a '"woman-wise penology"' built on an 'open-ended feminist jurisprudence' as key steps leading eventually to 'the virtual abolition of women's imprisonment' (Carlen, 1990 p. 9). This abolitionist position avoided the pitfalls of liberal reformism, and challenged the power of the prison, to engage in the centuries-old state strategy of 'carceral clawback' (Carlen, 2002) where threats to its ongoing existence through anything other than self-delusional, snake oil, liberal policy reforms have been derided, delayed and defused before being harmlessly integrated into the system. She concluded:

> The choice is between continuing to squander millions of pounds on prisons or taking bold steps to stop legislators and sentencers seeing the prisons as being the ultimate panacea for all political, social and penal ills. Abolishing women's imprisonment for an experimental period might be one small step towards giving the criminal justice and penal systems the thorough shake-up they so desperately need (Carlen, 1990 p. 125).

Fifth, three decades on, Carlen's model for radically decarcerating, and ultimately abolishing women's prisons, remains visionary. A number of organizations have demanded introducing radical alternatives to women's prisons. In the aftermath of the appalling death of the baby in Bronzefeld prison referred to earlier, *Women in Prison* called on the government '…….to introduce deferred sentencing for pregnant women and urgently prioritise investment in women's centres, social housing, education and health care' (cited in Devlin and Taylor, 2019 p.13).

Other groups have also demanded that a range of radical policies based on 'an abolitionist vision and decarceration strategy' should be developed (Carlton and Russell 2018 p. 122). INQUEST has demanded radical policy changes designed to reduce and eliminate the preventable deaths of women in prison through: creating a Standing Commission on Custodial Deaths with a specific stream on the deaths of women in prison; redirecting resources away from criminal justice to radical alternatives to custody based on social care, welfare housing and health strategies;

stopping the prison building programme; reviewing sentencing policy in England and Wales; reviewing the deaths of women post-release; and ensuring that the families of the deceased have access to justice via non-means tested legal aid (INQUEST, 2018; 2019).

Finally, how can radical alternatives to women's prisons be linked to the rich body of work around feminist conceptualisations of justice? Answering this question means '[c]onnecting criminal justice and institutional justice' and 'reconceptualising justice' through feminist praxis (Atkinson 2020, pp. 270 and 289). In theoretical, political and practical terms, this would also mean thinking about the meaning of safety for women in the twenty first century. As Alison Phipps has argued, safety should not 'reinforce the stigmatisation and alienation of marginalised people' (cited in ibid, p. 294). Imprisonment is one area in which this is evident, as Richie (2012 p.15) notes, for Black women who experience male violence, there are:

> perils inherent in relying on intervention strategies… that focus on punishment rather than prevention of violence and that ignore the broader need for redistribution of social power along gender and racial lines.

Therefore, women's safety 'in any institution or community can…..be connected to the safety of women more generally' (Atkinson, 2020, p.294). In line with this, Kristin Bumiller has called for grass roots feminist organisations to make:

> connections to other broadly based anti-violence movements both locally and globally, including those that raise concerns about the state as perpetrators of violence in the form of police brutality, discrimination against immigrants, racism in all aspects of crime enforcement and in foreign wars (Bumiller, 2008 p. 164).

These connections illuminate the links between 'intimate partner violence, community violence, state violence, and the harm caused by public policy' (Richie, 2012 p. 102). This strategy would challenge the isolating alienation that women in prison endure by linking their physical and psychological desolation to the interpersonal and structural politics of women's safety more generally. Given that 'heteropatriarchy kills' (Harris, 2011 p. 13), no woman in prison is safe, until all women are safe.

Conclusion

For 200 hundred years, the prison has been a site for delivering punishment and pain to poor and powerless women. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, it continues to fulfil this historical role. The fact that the present Conservative government is contemplating building 500 new prison places for women, in the face of the abject failure of the prison to fulfil its official goals, indicates that punishing poor women remains central to the state's strategy of discipline and control. In an age of rampant white collar, corporate and state criminality, it is not the 'good chaps' who engage in hugely detrimental social harms which often lead to thousands of violent, preventable 'social murders' (Tombs, 2016) who are at the centre of the state's malevolent, punitive gaze. As ever, it is those languishing at the bottom of the ladder of gendered, social inequality, living in a compassionless, neoliberal, society, who are punished for being poor, a brutal process which, for women, is compounded by the disproportionate misery inflicted by austerity-driven cuts (Perrons, 2021).

Women in prison are mangled debris who are mercilessly 'churn[ed]' through unforgiving state institutions from an early age in increasingly racialised numbers (Sawyer and Wagner, 2019 p. 4). Marie Baker, who was sentenced to 24 weeks in prison for begging for 50 pence in the street, provides one vivid, poignant illustration of the will to punish (Sim, 2019). Prosecuting women for the non-payment of television licences, which accounted for 30% of all female prosecutions in 2018, further illustrates the pitiless nature of gendered punishment. According to the BBC, the high number of women prosecuted was due to *'the increased availability of women to answer the door whenever we visit, and the increased likelihood of women to open the door and engage positively'* (Casey, 2019, emphasis added).

Contemporary women's prisons, like their historical predecessors, are not overflowing with conventionally-defined, dangerous individuals. As this chapter has shown, while the vast majority of incarcerated women might not be dangerous to the prison and the wider society, the prison, and the wider criminal justice and welfare system, are dangerous to them. Introducing and *enforcing* the feminist-based strategies outlined above, and abolishing prisons in their present form, is the only viable, political option if the dangers posed to women in prison are to be alleviated and prevented.

There is also a moral issue here in that there is a direct obligation on the part of academics, and the wider society, to recognise that 'saying or doing nothing' is not an option as this constitutes 'another harm'. Living in a world where the systemic harms generated by the prison is an everyday occurrence, makes us 'all responsible - to varying degrees - for recovery from and prevention of such harms' (Stauffer, 2015 p. 28).

This profound insight is something for us all to reflect on, and to take concerted action about. More broadly, as this chapter has argued, until women's prisons are abolished; there is a radical transformation in the state's capacity to exercise decimating, patriarchal power; and the lacerating culture of hegemonic masculinity, which dominates and subjugates women structurally and psychologically is consigned to the dustbin of history, then the next preventable death in a woman's prison is inevitable.

References

Atkinson, K. (2020) *'"An Amplified Space": A feminist poststructuralist analysis of sexual violence at university'* Unpublished PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University

Brooks, L. (2021) **'**Four in five female prisoners in Scotland found to have history of head injury' in *The Guardian* May 13, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/may/13/four-in-five-female-prisoners-in-scotland-found-to-have-history-of-head-injury Accessed 8th June 2021

Brown, M. (2020) 'Transformative Justice and New Abolition in the United States' in Carlen, P. and Franca, L. A. (eds) *Justice Alternatives* London: Routledge pp. 73-87

Bumiller, K. (2008) *In An Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence* Durham: Duke University Press

Carlen, P. (1990) *Alternatives to Women's Imprisonment* Buckingham: Open University Press

Carlen, P. (2002) 'Carceral Clawback: The Case of Women's Imprisonment in Canada' in *Punishment and Society,* 4, 1 pp. 115-121

Carlton, B. and Russell, E. (2018) *Resisting Carceral Violence: Women's Imprisonment and the Politics of Abolition* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Coles, D. and Shaw, H. (no date) *Learning from Death in Custody Inquests: A new Framework for* Action *and Accountability* London: INQUEST

Coleman, R. and Sim, J. (2000) '"You'll never walk alone": CCTV surveillance, order and neo-liberal rule in Liverpool city centre' in *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51, 4, pp. 623-639

Connell, R. W. (1994) in 'The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal' Radtke, H. L. and Stam, H. J. (eds) *Power/Gender: Social Relations in Theory and Practice* London: Sage pp. 136-173

Devlin, H. and Taylor, D. (2019) *'Multiple inquiries ordered into death of baby in UK prison'* https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/08/multiple-inquiries-ordered-into-death-of-baby-in-uk-prison Accessed 15th April 2021

Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Harmondsworth: Peregrine

Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended* London: Penguin

Haney, L. A. (2010) *Offending Women: Power, Punishment and the Regulation of Desire* Berkeley: University of California Press

Harris, A. (2011) 'Heteropatriarchy Kills: Challenging Gender Violence in a Prison Nation' in Journal of Law and Policy 37, 1, pp 37-65

HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021) *Business plan 2021–22* London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons

INQUEST (2018) *Dying on the Inside: Examining Deaths in Women's Prisons* London: INQUEST

INQUEST (2019) *Still Dying on the Inside: Examining Deaths in Women's Prisons Update* London: INQUEST

INQUEST (no date) *Press Release: Failures of West Midlands Police and National Probation Service contributed to homicide of Lisa Skidmore inquest finds* London: INQUEST

Jasper, L. (2017) 'Those who failed Sarah Reed must be held to account' in *The Guardian,* 24th July 2017

Kendall, K. (2013) 'Post-release support for women in England and Wales: the big picture' in Carlton, B. and Segrave, M. (eds) *Women Exiting Prison: Critical essays on Gender, Post-Release Support and Survival* London: Routledge pp. 34-55

Mathiesen, T. (1980) *Law, Society and Political Action* London: Academic Press

Ministry of Justice (2021*) Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to December 2020 Assaults and Self-harm to September 2020* London: Ministry of Justice

Ministry of Justice (2019) *Deaths of Offenders in the Community, England and Wales, 2018/19* London: Ministry of Justice

National Audit Office (2017) *Mental Health in Prisons* London: National Audit Office

Owen, B., Wells, J. and Pollock, J. (2017) *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women's Imprisonment* Oakland: University of California Press

Pantazis, C. (2004) 'Gendering Harm Through a Life Course Perspective' in Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Tombs, S. and Gordon, D. (eds) *Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously* London: Pluto pp. 192-216

Perrons, D. (2021) *Is Austerity Gendered?* Cambridge: Polity

Price, J. M. (2015) *Prison and Social Death* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press

Prison Reform Trust (2020) *'New report exposes system failure condemning 6 out of 10 women leaving prison to homelessness'* London: Prison Reform Trust

Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (2019) *Annual Report 2018-19* CP 175 London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office

Richie, B. (2012) *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* London: New York University Press

Sawyer, W. and Wagner, P. (2019) *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019*. Published by the Prison Policy Initiative and available at https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reprts/pie2019.html Accessed 20 June 2019

Sim, J. (2009) Punishment *and Prisons: Power and the Carceral State* London: Sage

Sim, J. (2014) '"Welcome to the Machine": Poverty and Punishment in Austere Times' in *Prison Service Journal* 213, May pp. 17-23

Sim, J. (2019) *Shredding Human Beings: Death and Self-Harm in Prisons* https://ccseljmu.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/shredding-human-beings-death-and-self-harm-in-prisons/

Smart, C. (1995) *Law, Crime and Sexuality: Essays in Feminism* London: Sage

Stanley, L. (1990) '"Feminist Praxis and the Academic Mode of Production: An Editorial Introduction' in Stanley, L. (ed) *Feminist Praxis: Research Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* London: Routledge pp. 3-19

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1990) 'Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes' in Stanley, L. (ed) *Feminist Praxis: Research Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* London: Routledge pp. 20-60

Stauffer, J. (2015) *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* New York: Columbia University Press

Stevenson. L. (2014) *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* Oakland: University of California Press

Taylor, D. (2019) *'Inquiry launched into death of woman at Derbyshire prison* https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/13/inquiry-launched-into-death-of-woman-at-derbyshire-prison Accessed 15th April 2021

Thuma, E. (2019) *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Tombs, S. (2016) '*Better Regulation': Better for whom?* Briefing 14, London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

Tokarezuk, O. (2019) *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* London: Fitzcarraldo

Whitcomb, M. (2017) *Prison Abolition is the Feminist Issue We Need to Talk About* http://www.theradicalnotion.com/prisons-abolition/ Accessed 23 September 2019

---

[i] Thanks to Lindsey Metcalf for organising the 'Shut Up and Write' sessions at Liverpool John Moores University where much of this chapter was written.

[ii] Research in Scottish prisons has found that 80% of women in prison had a 'history of significant head injury, with sustained domestic abuse the most likely cause' (Brooks, 2021).