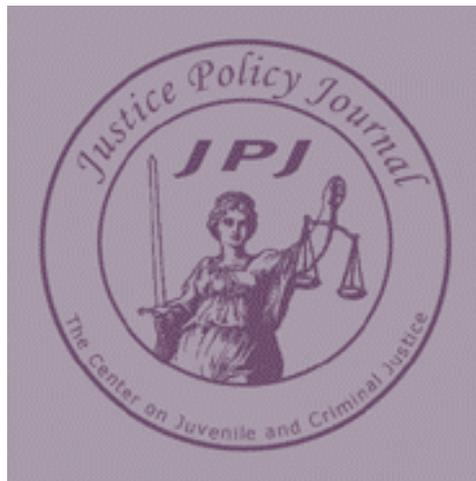


The View From the Other Side of the Fence: Incarcerated Women Talk about Themselves

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Abstract

Women are the demographic group with the fastest growing incarceration rates, yet historically women's prisons have been built and organized according to the male model. In this manner female convicts' special needs have been ignored. In recent years a small body of literature has begun to address the special situation of women in the criminal justice system, the way that the nature of their crimes and their life in prison is different than that of men and is rooted in patriarchy. Listening to the voices of the women themselves reveals the interrelated nature of the crimes for which they are convicted and their structural position.

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Introduction

In a recent documentary Amy Goodman, producer of the news broadcast *Democracy Now*, discussed the importance of going to where the silences are and giving voice to people who can not speak for themselves. Until recently women's prisons have been such places of silence. Incarcerated women are marginalized because of their race, class, and gender, and also because they are perceived not only as a threat to the economic order, but especially to the moral and political order. In recent years a small body of academic literature has begun to address the special situation of women in the criminal justice system, the way that the nature of their crimes and their life in prison is different than that of men and rooted in patriarchy.

In social policy, in the administration of criminal justice, and to a large extent in criminology, the real people actually involved in the crime are curiously missing. By looking at statistics, numbers, categories of offenders it becomes deceptively easy to distinguish clearly between criminals and victims, between criminals and law-abiding citizens. This applies to men, but even more so to women in prison.

A recently emerging group known as "Convict Criminologists" (ex-cons who have entered academia) try to integrate the experiences of prisoners and prisons in their theoretical work in criminology in terms of subject as well as methodology. These experiences may be their own as former convicts, as different kinds of employees in prisons, or as academics who have conducted research inside prisons. To this end they may draw on their autobiographical experiences, biographies, or ethnographies. Convict Criminologists are unique in that they have advanced academic degrees in fields related

to criminology and integrate this professional expertise with their personal experiences in prisons. This allows them to critique the criminal justice system, public policy, as well as the field of criminology from a unique perspective (Ross and Richards, 2003).

In this paper I want to outline some of these issues in regard to incarcerated women and refer to the few quasi-biographic accounts that exist as well as my own experiences in male and female prisons in Wisconsin to sketch a picture of women experience being in prison. For the last ten years I have taught colleges classes in sociology and cultural anthropology in an upper-medium security male prison, the F.C.I. Oxford. The convicts in this prison taught me about their experiences in the criminal justice system and their lives before incarceration. A few years ago I began to also visit women's prisons through a domestic violence prevention program to give short college preparatory workshops and to learn about their stories and concerns directly from them.

Women and Crime

The most recent figures (as of June 30, 2004) show that there are just over 2.1 million people incarcerated in the United States. One writer estimated that while the United States has around 6% of the global population, it has about 25% of the global prison population (Elsner, 2004).¹ About 7% of the US prison population is female. They are by far the fastest growing segment of the prison population (their incarceration rate went from 47 per 100,000 in 1995 to 63 in 2004) and a disproportionate number of them are minorities. More specifically, whereas the incarceration rate for white women is 81 the rate for black women is more than four times greater at 359; for Hispanic women it is 143 (Harrison and Beck, 2005).

The main categories of female offenses are violent offenses, property offenses, and drug related crimes and, to a smaller extent, public order crimes. Closer scrutiny shows that the actual crimes that women are convicted for and their motives for them are different than those of men and are closely related to the structural situation of women in this society. The characteristics are histories of abuse, of being responsible for children, and being limited to low skill/low income jobs. Incarcerated women grew up in abusive families to a much higher extent than men and a majority of them had experienced domestic violence. Two-thirds of the women have children under the age of 18 and the literature is quite unanimous on the central role of family, particularly children, in the lives of incarcerated women (Owen 1998, 2005) and this is much truer than in the case of men. Yet as single parents with usually low skills it is for most difficult or impossible to support their children

The literature often treats these characteristics as distinct issues, yet most of the time they blur in the actual lives of women. By separating these issues for the purpose of theorizing we may lose sight of the humanity of the convicts and the gendered nature of their offenses. For instance, women incarcerated for a violent crime have committed this crime predominantly within the family. I often hear that “the woman snapped”, she reacted to observed abuse or many years of experienced domestic violence perpetrated by a husband, a boyfriend, a father, an uncle. One of the women I worked with in a Wisconsin prison wrote the following:

**“With this ring I thee wed
For better or worse, in
Sickness and in health
‘till death us do part”**

Till death do us part...

I never knew what those words meant the first seven years of my marriage. I was a good wife by anyone's standards: good housekeeper, excellent cook, worked hard, took good care of our children. I thought everything was fine. Nothing could go wrong. Then one day after an argument that I thought was nothing I was pushed and slapped very hard. I cry and do nothing.

The pushes come more frequently, the slaps all the time. I cry and do nothing. I thought if I worked harder, clean more, keep the children out of his way (keep them quiet) this would stop as suddenly as it started. I was willing to do whatever I could think of in order not to get slapped just because my face was there.

I call the police and they drop him off around the corner at the nearest bar - he walks back home. In fear, shame and guilt I hide from family, friends, and co-workers. I become isolated and build my small world around my children and church. Keep them safe! They must never ever see this. They must never know. I pray and pray that this nightmare will soon end.

The more I prayed the worse things got. Pushes and slaps turn to shoves and punches. Body punches so that no one can see the bruises. Then the lying starts: to cover why I "wince" when I sit down, get up or why I'm walking so slowly. I continue to suffer, cry, endure and do nothing.

I become paranoid thinking that everyone knows that something is wrong. The lie continues that "everything is just fine". Shame myself! Shame my family! Embarrass him! It wasn't worth it knowing what the end result would be.

After many years I finally leave and get away. The safe house is actually a "known house". It becomes a struggle to get to work, get the children to school, and meet the guidelines to stay in the safe house. Keeping up the mask becomes too much work. The children are miserable, and they don't understand why they have to live there.

Pushes, shoves, slaps, and punches. It did me no good to try and leave. I can't take it anymore. I'm going crazy. I can't sleep at night. I'm being punched in my sleep only to wake up to be slapped. I cry and do nothing.

I get tired enough to try leaving again. This time I tell my children of this decision. The oldest tells me, "Momma if you take me away from

my daddy I'm going to kill myself.” Her life is more valuable than mine -- stay, continue to cry and do nothing.

After many years, I finally have had enough of crying and doing nothing. I strike back very violently -- I'm incarcerated.

I left home and came back more than once; I was so ashamed I didn't know what to do or who to trust. Leave go back -- leave go back -- why bother to leave. The wounds of violence are still open and they will always hurt. Now that I'm safe (incarcerated) I'm seeking changes and solutions for myself. What could I have done differently?

Solutions.... Change.....I'm struggling to find them

*This "problem" is very shameful, don't you see
Day by day I'd wonder what's it going to be
In the beginning it was we
I pronounce you man and wife said he
Till death us do part its was written to be
I can help by finally admitting that this is me*

Anonymous

Drug use for women is often intertwined with abuse in a number of ways. The devastation and long-term harm that results from abuse for most victims is obviously highly individual. For many women drug use has become a coping strategy to deal with these long-term effects. Lori Pompa, the director of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program at Temple University and has articulated this connection as she experienced it in her female convict students:

You're tired...so tired.....tired of how it all goes down. You've spent your life being aware of others – their needs, their feelings, their wants, their desires. In fact, you've never really had a life of your own. From as far back as you can remember, you were told what to do, told to be good – and you listened, or so you thought.....and then the beatings would start. It seemed like no matter what you did, no matter how hard you tried, you were wrong....and you felt ashamed, just for being you.

Your mother would beat you – but you never really knew why... and your father would have his way with you. But that was ok – ‘cause you knew they both loved you... you were sure of that. Yet sometimes, it seemed so confusing.....

As you grew up, you never really knew what you wanted. But you figured out one really important thing –how to feel better. You found ways to get away from the pain... and that was the most important thing – stopping the pain. Whatever it takes.

So here you are – in that place again... the same barbed wire, the same concrete walls, the same damned putrid air. Last time, you said you’d never be back and you meant it. Everything was going along fine, but then....well, then the pain came back – and you did what you had to do. You’re so tired of this place – all the women...frozen in suspended animation.... (Pompa, 2004).

Other offenses relate directly to women as sole caretakers of children without other adequate support. A number of women I talked to in Wisconsin prisons are incarcerated because of “drug sweat shop labor”. The women are not able to support themselves and their children on a minimum wage job, so they packaged crack into \$10, \$20, or \$50 dollar bags for a drug dealer.

Another large number of women I talked to were in prison for being “party to a crime”. If a family member uses their property to stash or sell drugs, even without their knowledge, the woman may be convicted to a long sentence. Some teenage mothers thus find themselves with impossible choices. They can risk going to prison or take apart their teenager’s room daily and thereby seriously harm an often already fragile relationship.

Inside the Prison

The situation of women inside prisons has also recently received some attention. This, still very limited literature shows how on one hand women’s prisons are built and organized on the model of male prisons. On the other hand, because women pose such a

low security threat compared to men they are neglected in regard to just about all services. Most women's prisons have no or only a skeleton library and little or no programming to learn life skills. The healthcare available to convicts shows signs of severe neglect throughout the country (Rau, 2005). However, this problem is aggravated in women's prisons where the health care system is characterized by severe shortages of personal and financial resources. Women's prisons, including medical care, are built on the male model. That means the medical staffing of women's prisons is proportionately the same as in male prisons. Women's special medical needs are ignored (Bond and Kuhlmann, 2003). This is not only in regard to gynecological problems; many women enter prison with severe health problems related to poverty, drug use, and domestic abuse. The traumatic histories that led to many women's crimes in the first place created high levels of mental illness, yet appropriate counseling is hardly available. A much higher percentage of female than male prisoners are mentally ill; this is due to men's socialized tendency to externalize aggression and women's to internalize it. This situation has become so severe that Amnesty International is reporting on it (Ammar and Erez 2000, Stoller 2003).

Women I talked to in Wisconsin prisons were particularly concerned about their children, their safety and the effect that the incarceration would have on them. Besides that they were concerned especially about disciplinary issues. Although there is very little violence in women's prisons compared to men's, women are cited for disciplinary infractions at a much higher level than male convicts. This points particularly to the problematic of having male guards in women's prisons. Not only does sexual abuse by male guards occur, it is also always a more subtle undercurrent. Women engaged in

behavior not experienced as particularly physical are cited for perceived sexualized activities such as “vigorously shaking her bootie” and sent to “the hole” or SHU (secure housing unit). This is exacerbated by the lack of privacy and what Barbara Owen calls “the male gaze”. In the hole the women are often further demeaned for their hygienic needs:

They only allow you a shower once or twice a week and then the shower is all moldy, the flies keep crawling out of the shower. They only give you government issued deodorant and it smells bad.

The isolation in this solitary confinement, the experience of arbitrariness that put them there, as well as the sexualization of their bodies by male guards means frequent re-experiencing of abuse.

The highly individual nature of these personal stories that led women into prison, especially the deep interconnection between intimate violence and the crimes committed by women is presented in depth and richness in at least 3 works. One book edited by Wally Lamb (2003) *Couldn't Keep It to Myself* (Regan Books), another one by Paula C. Johnson (2002), *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*, and a documentary DVD by Eve Ensler (2003) *What I Want My Words to Do to You*. These works are new approaches in that they present the results of creative writing classes in which the women use creative writing as a tool of self-exploration and healing. Through the writing process they come to terms with their very personal histories, the contexts that led to their crimes, and find meaning in their current (incarcerated) life.

Conclusion

Allowing the voices of the incarcerated to be heard complements our understanding of crime and criminal justice in important ways and may lead to some

necessary changes. It allows us to see the interconnections of women's particular life situations, especially the impact of patriarchy, and their offenses. The stories of women show in powerful and moving ways how in many instances, childhood and adult abuse and single parenthood without outside support are interrelated with drug abuse or possession, and property crimes. They show that by incarcerating women, individuals are blamed for the failure of public policy and the real impact of patriarchy. Instead these stories may help to get away from a retribution model in criminal justice to one of prevention and wellness.

And it is high time that the US catches up with other industrial countries which are already acknowledging these connections. In Germany for instance, this is acknowledged with the use of the term "Nahraumdelikte" (Kuhlmann 2004). This term refers to crimes related to the immediate family sphere and the role of women in society. It includes an awareness of the consequences of the lack of financial and emotional support of women raising children, intimate violence, and related property crimes such as shoplifting, and the double burden of wage labor and family work. "Nahraumdelikte" emphasizes that women mostly commit crimes as a result of failed attempts to live a traditional female role or a family crises and lack of support from the family.

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Note

¹ The accuracy of this estimated may be in dispute, for according to a British survey China has 1.4 million, but this excludes pre-trial detainees, which would be the equivalent to our jails. Regardless, the overall incarceration rate in the U.S. is the highest in the world at around 700. See "World Prison Population List," Home Office, 2003. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r188.pdf>