

Briefing for Westminster Hall debate: Women released from prison
Wednesday 18th October 2017, 4.30pm

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, welcomes the debate on women released from prison. Ten years on from the Corston Review, and with the Female Offenders' Strategy due imminently, this presents an opportunity to look at how we can better support women leaving prison, reduce reoffending and improve outcomes for women, their families and society as a whole. We are calling on MPs to attend the debate, and consider the following issues.

There are very high levels of vulnerability amongst the female prison population, and prison can be hugely damaging. Women in prison have often experienced extensive abuse and are likely to have complex mental health, addiction and other needs.

- A third of female offenders were in care as children – their complex needs go back to childhood.
- 46% report having suffered domestic violence and 53% report having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood.ⁱ This is likely to be a significant underestimate.
- Women account for 16% of self-harm incidents in prison despite making up only 5% of the prison population.ⁱⁱ
- Many enter custody homeless or lose their homes while in custody -up to 60% of women prisoners do not have homes to go to on releaseⁱⁱⁱ. Many sleep on the streets the night they leave prison, with reports in 2016 of women leaving HMP Bronzefield with tents and sleeping bags.^{iv}
- 95% of children who are separated from their mother by imprisonment have to leave the family home to go into care or live with relatives^v - prison is damaging to families as well as women.

BAME and foreign national women in prison face particular disadvantages.

- 18% of female prisoners are BAME^{vi}, compared to 14% of the general population.^{vii}
- Within this, some groups of women are particularly overrepresented, most notably Black or Black British^{viii} women who make up 8.8% of female prisoners, compared to 3.3% of the general population^{ix}.
- Agenda and Women in Prison's report, Double Disadvantage^x, found that BAME women felt discriminated against through the courts and in prison.

Prison is not effective for most women. Female offenders have high rates of reoffending on release from prison: 48% of women are reconvicted within one year of leaving prison, a figure which rises to 61% for sentences of less than 12 months.^{xi} This is because:

- Prisons often do not offer sufficient support to help women address the multiple disadvantages they face.
- Because they commit less serious crimes, most women in prison are on remand or serving short sentences with little opportunity to address the underlying causes of their crimes and prevent their reoffending.
- Many women reoffend on release because of a lack of support outside the prison gates.

Women can be more effectively rehabilitated outside the criminal justice system.

- Alternatives to custody for women are cost effective: the annual cost of one prison place (approximately £42,765) would support about 15 women on community orders or on diversion programmes. Modelling^{xii} suggests that investing £18m per year in women's centres could save almost £1 billion over 5 years.
- Women's specialist services including women's centres also have a proven track-record of providing effective therapeutic and practical help and interventions that support rehabilitation and help women turn their lives around.
- Ministry of Justice analysis shows a statistically significant reduction in re-offending rates for those who receive support from women's centres.^{xiii}
- But the government's Transforming Rehabilitation programme puts these services at risk. Many Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) are not commissioning the services that have been shown to work. Some specialist services are not being contracted at all; others are being

offered a reduced payment for their services and some are not getting commissioned referrals through in the numbers that they are contracted for.

We need better services for women facing multiple disadvantages in the community and the custodial estate.

- Female offenders need gender-specific support around reoffending, housing, addiction, mental health, and abuse to tackle the underlying causes of their offending.
- *Mapping the Maze*, a report recently published by Agenda and AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) found patchy provision for women across these sectors, with a woman's ability to access services being dependent on where she lives.^{xiv}
- Services specifically for female offenders were found in just 64.2% of English local authorities and 40.9% of Welsh unitary authorities – many women are not receiving effective support on release from prison.

What can you do?

We believe that a discussion on women leaving prison should centre around the fact that female offenders are likely to face multiple disadvantage and will need holistic, trauma-informed support to address the issues they face and to tackle the underlying causes of their offending.

We would be grateful if you would raise the following issues with government:

- How will the female offenders' strategy ensure a reduction in the female prison population and diversion of vulnerable women from the criminal justice system? What investment in community services, such as women's centres, will accompany the strategy?
- Will the government review how Transforming Rehabilitation is working and the role of Community Rehabilitation Companies in order to ensure the sustainability of vital specialist women's centres?
- Will the government ensure better funded support within the community for women facing addiction, mental ill health, homelessness, and contact with the criminal justice system?
- What is being done to support women to keep or find housing on release from prison?
- What is being done to ensure specialist services including around mental health, housing, abuse and addiction for women and girls within the custodial estate are properly resourced and meet the needs of vulnerable women?

About Agenda

Agenda is an alliance of more than 80 voluntary sector organisations. We work to ensure that women and girls at risk of abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness get the support and protection they need. We campaign for systems and services to be transformed; to raise awareness across sectors; and to promote public and political understanding of the lives of women and girls facing multiple disadvantage.

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- ⁱ Women In Prison <http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/research/key-facts.php>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2017>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Home%20Truths.pdf>
- ^{iv} http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/women-offenders-leaving-prison-tents-sleeping-bags_uk_570e0e16e4b01711c612a9c7?utm_hp_ref=uk
- ^v Caddle, D and Crisp, D. (1997) Mothers in Prison HO Research and Statistics Directorate Findings No.38 London: TSO
- ^{vi} Ministry of Justice statistics, March 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2015>
- ^{vii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2016>
- ^{viii} 371 of the 3826 female prisoners were black or black British (Prison Statistics, 31 March 2016)
- ^{ix} Office of National Statistics, 2011: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>
- ^x <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Double-disadvantage-FINAL.pdf>
- ^{xi} Bromley Briefings Prison: the Facts Summer 2017, Prison Reform Trust
- ^{xii} Counting the Cost, Revolving Doors, http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/1793/download?token=_uhAj6qr
- ^{xiii} https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/427388/womens-centres-report.pdf
- ^{xiv} Mapping the Maze, Agenda and AVA, <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Mapping-the-Maze-final-report-for-publication.pdf>