

Tainted Love:

The Impact of Prison on Mothering Identity Explored via Mothers' Post Prison Reflections

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Mothers enter prison already disadvantaged, judged, excluded and most often in pain. Prison magnifies challenges to mothering and mothering identity.¹ This paper reflects on the described experiences of previously incarcerated mothers. The paper focuses particularly on the emotional aspects of the mother's experience, how being an imprisoned mother challenges her mothering identity and the mothering role; both during incarceration and long after release. The paper draws on the authors ongoing doctoral research, the purpose of which is to 'understand more about the impact of prison on mothers who experience custody', as well as the author's previous research in this important area.² The data is drawn from in-depth interviews which took place with 21 released mothers between January 2016 and October 2016. All participants volunteered to take part and gave appropriate informed consent. The mothers had been out of prison for periods ranging from one to 26 years since their last sentence and were aged between 19 and 66.

Context and Landscape

I woke up in the early hours of the morning and it was still there [the worry about my daughter] the first thing that came into my head. I had pictures of my little girl in the cell. Before I knew what, I was doing I was slitting my wrists. (Sharon)³

This quote is almost 30 years old, yet it remains tragically and poignantly relevant today. Deaths in custody are rising and are the highest they have been for decades. The female prison population has more than doubled since 1991. In 2016 there were double the number of female self-inflicted deaths in custody from the previous year.⁴ Women account for over 23 per cent of all self-harm incidents in prison—despite making up only five per cent of the total prison population⁵ (nine per cent of all receptions). Furthermore, 46 per cent of women in custody have previously attempted suicide at some point in their lives.⁶

Over 80 per cent of women are in prison for non-violent offences, and for women, escape from prison is almost unheard of, one must therefore wonder why closed conditions and all that might come with this level of security (for example being handcuffed when attending ante natal appointments) are necessary for most women in prison. As one mother rather succinctly put it, when questioning the logic of being placed in closed conditions: 'What were we going to do, shoplift or fraud them to death?' (Rita, 35)⁷

Women come to prison earlier in their criminal career and for less serious crimes and so are often even less prepared for custody than their male counterparts.⁸ Many mothers in the study described their first days in prison, the first few days separated from their children, as their worst, thus highlighting the particular importance of a well-resourced first night centre.⁹ Women in prison are, as Corston suggested already a 'vulnerable population'.¹⁰ We know that most women come to prison already dealing with the pain from

1. Baldwin, L., Motherhood Disrupted: Reflections of Post Prison Mothers. *Emotion, Space and Society* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.02.002><http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.02.002>.
2. Baldwin, L. (2015), *Mothering Justice: Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings*. Sheffield on Lodden. Waterside Press.
3. Stevenson, P. Padel, U. (1988) *Insiders: Women's Experience of Prison* London, Virago Press. P.100.
4. Figures provided by INQUEST accessed at <http://www.inquest.org.uk/statistics/deaths-of-women-in-prison>.
5. Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile Autumn 2016. Prison Reform Trust www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Publications/Factfile
6. Ibid.
7. See 1 also.
8. Gelsthorpe, L. (2007) *Sentencing and Gender* in Sheehan, S. McIvor, G. & Trotter, C. *What Works with Women Offenders?* Cullompton. Willan.
9. Baldwin, L. (2017) Mothers in Prison: The Importance of Working Compassionately with Maternal Emotion in *Criminal Law & Justice Weekly* (2017:181:45–47).
10. Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. London: Home Office www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf.

Why is it different for Mothers?

broken and challenged lives. Over half will have experienced physical emotional and sexual abuse (as children and often as adults too).¹¹ We know that most women in prison are incarcerated as a result of nonviolent offences such as theft, fraud or breach.¹² We know that many women come to prison addicted to substances—often used to as a means of coping with and masking pain from their traumatic lived experiences.¹³ Carlen,¹⁴ Corston¹⁵ and many others, over the last 30 years have campaigned and hoped for different treatment of women in the criminal justice system, calling for far fewer women to be sent to prison in the first instance. This drive for change is born out of recognition that prison doesn't work for women (and arguably most men). Failing the achievement of fewer women in prison, Carlen et al hoped, at least, that conditions for women in prison would improve by the system adopting and accepting gender specific responses. Whilst there have been some positive developments for women, there can be no doubt there is significant room for further improvement—particularly in relation to incarcerated mothers. This article highlights the emotional context for incarcerated and released mothers, exploring how supporting their maternal emotions and mothering identity can have a positive impact on mothers (and their children), both during and after custody. The article includes the 'voices' of mothers from the aforementioned study. Although the focus of this article is mothers, much of this discussion is relevant to incarcerated fathers and the author welcomes and acknowledges the innovative work undertaken with fathers, via programmes such as 'Family Man', and the excellent and innovative developments headed by Corin Morgan-Armstrong at HMP Parc via its family wing.¹⁶

... because there are fewer women's prisons, (none in Wales, or the Isle of Wight), women are often located even further away from their families—on average 60 miles, but often as far as 150 miles.

Feminist Criminologists have long argued for a gendered response to women and criminal justice, in terms of recognition of women's pathways into crime, women as victims of crime, and additionally how women *experience* the criminal justice system. Of course, for any primary carer or parent, relationships with dependants are inevitably affected by incarceration, however, the impact is often greater when it is a mother who is imprisoned, both practically and emotionally.¹⁷ When a mother is incarcerated only five per cent of children affected remain in their own homes, and only nine per cent with their father. When a father is imprisoned most children remain with their mothers. It is not unusual for a mother to lose custody or care of her children (14 per cent go directly into local authority care), as well as losing their home. In addition, because there are fewer women's prisons, (none in Wales, or the Isle of Wight), women are often located even further away from their families—on average 60 miles, but often as far as 150 miles.¹⁸ Consequently, the distance and cost implications can mean many mothers receive few, irregular, or no visits at all from their children. Statistics vary in relation to the recorded number of mothers in custody with children aged under 18. One study¹⁹ in 2005 placed the figure as high as 66 per cent; Ministry of Justice²⁰ figures estimate the figure to be between 24–31 per cent, based on the number of child benefit claimants (eligibility to which ends when a child leaves full time education). However, there are many reasons a mother might not disclose that she has children when coming to prison, not least the fear of losing them to the Care System, therefore these figures cannot be considered absolute.

11. See 4 also.

12. Additional statistical information taken from Prison Reform Trust. Bromley Briefings Factfile accessed at <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Publications/Factfile>.

13. Baldwin, L, O'Malley, & Galway, K (2015) 'Mothers Addicted'. In Baldwin, L. (auth/ed) *Mothering Justice: Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings*. Sheffield. Waterside Press.

14. Carlen, P. (2002) *Women and Punishment: The Struggle for Justice*. Cullompton: Willan.

15. See 10 also.

16. See <https://www.channel4.com/news/dads-behind-bars-teaching-inmates-to-put-kids-before-crime-parc-prison-andy-davies>.

17. See 1 and Enos, S. (2001) *Mothering from the inside: Parenting in a women's prison*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

18. Minson, Nadine., Earle, J. (2015) Sentencing of Mothers: Improving the sentencing process and outcomes for mothers with dependent children. Prison Reform Trust. Accessed at. http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/sentencing_mothers.pdf.

19. Liebling, A. & Maruna, S. (2005) *The effects of imprisonment* Devon: Willan.

20. MOJ. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/female-offenders-and-child-dependents>.

The 'Good' Mother Identity

Maternal theorist, Andrea O'Reilly²¹ supports the feminist view that gender, and to some extent motherhood, is socially constructed; influenced by culture, religion and particularly patriarchy. However, O'Reilly suggests historically feminism has paid too little attention to motherhood and mothering from the perspective of mothers themselves. Arguing that motherhood should 'have a feminism of its own'. O'Reilly suggests this focussed feminism, which she terms 'matricentric feminism', is a place where mothering emotions are valued, respected and importantly, understood. She suggests it is possible to recognise that whilst aspects of gender are indeed 'constructed', that 'motherhood matters, and that maternity is integral to a mother's sense of self and her experience of the world'.²² Baldwin²³ argues that the principles of matricentric feminism ought to be applied to criminology, and used to inform understanding of how the criminal justice system, particularly prison, adversely affects women, particularly mothers.²⁴

Whatever the theoretical lens or the gendered ideologies surrounding the origins of the 'institution of motherhood',²⁵ or the norms and values associated with mothering; the reality is, most women enter prison from a society that perpetuates an accepted *ideal* of motherhood.²⁶ A mother's code of conduct, as such, describing which personal mothering qualities are important to mothering and how a mother *should* and importantly *shouldn't* behave. The most basic of these long-held beliefs is that mothers are, or rather *should* be, 'good', or as one mother in the study painfully reflected many years after the end of her sentence: '*Good mothers don't go to prison do they?*' (Mary, 66). Mothers who enter prison are no less subject to having absorbed the ideals and ideas of motherhood. Many enter prison already feeling they have 'failed' as mothers, because of their lived experience, their life chances and their life choices, which in turn has a huge impact on their self-esteem, maternal identity and

maternal emotions.²⁷ In addition to the fallout of often pain filled and broken lives, mothers in prison are also dealing with maternal emotions associated with their incarceration, not least the physical separation from their children. As Baroness Corston, further suggests, many women in prison:

*... still define themselves and are defined by others by their role in the family. It is an important component in our sense of self identity and self-esteem. To become a prisoner is almost by definition to become a bad mother.*²⁸

Maternal Identity and Role

Mothering from inside prison is a common feature of many female prisoner's lives. Corston talks of women 'running homes' from prison. Many mothers in the study commented on how remaining involved in 'family life' or decisions about the home and their children helped them maintain a feeling of 'connection and purpose'.

We would actually go through the shopping list together on the phone and I would help her decide what meals to cook for the little ones and her dad ... then I'd go through how to do it, step

by step. I think I enjoyed those phone calls the most as I was just a mum then ... just a mum on the other end of the phone. (Rita, 35, mum of four)

Not all mothers are able to afford to phone home every evening. Many mothers commented on the expense of maintaining contact due to the prohibitive cost of stamps or phone calls.²⁹ This proved particularly challenging in cases where siblings were separated—whether that be foster care or different relatives. Sometimes mothers had to 'choose which child to ring'

21. O'Reilly, A (2016) *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*. Canada. Demeter Press.

22. See 21 also, (page 204).

23. See 1 also.

24. Ibid.

25. For example, see O'Reilly, A. (2007) *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*. Bradford, Canada. Demeter Press

26. Enos (see 17).

27. Baldwin, (see 1) Enos (see 17), Corston (see 10).

28. See 10 also (2:2.17).

29. In Ireland, the Irish prison Service fund a daily phone call home for mothers and supply pre-paid envelopes (up to seven per week).

meaning for some that their relationships with their children were 'forever changed' (Sandra, 46, mother of four). Facilitating and supporting positive mothering and mothering contact from prison, would not only benefit mothers in maintaining mother/child relationships, but would potentially have far reaching benefits for the family and wider society.³⁰ Mothers described how positive maternal support could be a significant factor in relation to 'managing' her time inside successfully (or not).

When I went for my ante natal there was one officer who just made me feel shit every time they saw me, but most of them were lovely to me—they were kind and knew I was young and scared ... It's horrible being pregnant in prison ... if it weren't for the good ones being like that I know I wouldn't have coped ... I don't think I would have you know. (Tanisha, 31, mother of three)

It is important to note that not all women in prison are the same, indeed not all mothers are the same,³¹ mothers will experience the separation from their children in different ways. Some will completely shut down their emotions as a means of coping.

I spent my time in my room, I didn't speak unless I had to ... I didn't put no pictures of my kids up ... nothing ... I just wanted to blank the time away. (Karen, 44, mum of three)

This emotional disengagement may be from each other, their own emotions and their families, but also from staff and engagement with sentence planning. Thus, having implications for all her relationships, her coping, her motivation, her rehabilitation, and therefore her desistance. Rita, reflecting on her emotional state during custody, stated she understood why mothers in prison kill themselves, saying 'it's just too hard'. (Rita, mother of four). Some mothers may see prison as a safe place, a place to become substance free, to embrace a

new more motivated outlook and determination to succeed, for themselves and for their children.³² However, most mothers, including those who remain in contact with their children, and despite any positive aspects, will also see prison as traumatic, challenging, damaging and profoundly painful.³³

... she came yeah [to prison], I saw her, she never missed a visit, I rang her every night and to be honest we spoke more than maybe we did when I was at home ... but I will never ever ever forgive myself for coming here, for missing that time with her, her graduation, her first breakup with her boyfriend ... and if I'm honest, I don't really think she will ever forgive me either. (Maggi, 56, mother of four, grandmother of two)

... how the hell was I meant to concentrate?—I had had my girl on the phone the night before sobbing ...

Not all mothers in custody will have had their children in their care before coming to prison, not all will have their children returned to their care when leaving prison, but arguably all will experience emotions related to mothering. Baldwin in 'Mothering Justice'³⁴ suggests that motherhood is an additional 'layer' to be 'factored in' when working with the already complex needs of women in the criminal justice system. Baldwin suggests that failure to take this 'layer' into account can not only further harm and punish women, particularly those in prison—but it can also result in missed opportunities for positive intervention, relationship building and rehabilitation. This point was illustrated by Margot, who found herself subjected to the prison disciplinary process because she 'kicked off' at an officer when asked to come to a sentence plan review:

To be fair, I like them normally [sentence planning meetings] ... but how the hell was I meant to concentrate?—I had had my girl on the phone the night before sobbing, sobbing she was ... about those bastards bullying her for having a mother in jail ... I was that worried

30. See 1 also.

31. Rowe, A. (2011) Narratives of Self and Identity in Women's Prisons: Stigma and the struggle for self-definition in penal regimes. *In Punishment and Society*. 13: 571–591.

32. O'Malley S. and Devaney, C (2015): Maintaining the mother-child relationship within the Irish prison system: the practitioner perspective, *Child Care in Practice*, DOI: 10.1080/13575279.2015.1054786.

33. Datesman, S. and Cales, G. (1983); 'I'm still the same mommy'; Maintaining the Mother/Child Relationship in Prison. *The Prison Journal* Vol 63:2:142–154 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/003288558306300212>. Baldwin, L. & Epstein, R. (2017) *Short but not Sweet: A Study of the Impact of Short Sentences on Mothers and their Children*. ISBN-978-1-85721-431-4 De Montfort University available at; <https://www.dora.dmu.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2086/14301/Final%20Research%20Report%20LB%20RE%202017%20.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

34. See 2 (and also 1).

about her I was, and I had no phone credit left ... she says she's not going back [to school] ... and that I can't make her ... and she's right ain't she ... not from jail I couldn't, I couldn't do nothin ... I felt furious, furious with them ... but mostly furious with me [breaks down ...], how can I go in there and think about sentence planning when all I can do is cry my eyes out and think about our Miriam ... I'd end up lamping one of 'em and where would that get me? (Margot, 32, mum of one)

Enos³⁵ highlights the challenge for mothers to retain a 'good mother' identity in a place where every day they face challenges to this identity—not least from themselves. She suggests the 'act' of mothering is essential for the retention of a mothering self-identity. She further argues that assignation of roles is central to the activities associated with that role: a firefighter fights fires, a driver drives—a mother 'mothers'. Enos found that women's identities as mothers, particularly as 'good' mothers, was challenged because of the lack of opportunity or ability to undertake the daily tasks and activities associated with mothering. These findings are also supported by Baldwin and Epstein's recent research report,³⁶ and also in Baldwin's ongoing Doctoral research, where mothers have described experiencing complex and conflicting emotions in response to someone 'taking their place' in roles, activities and duties which the women saw belonged to them as mothers. For example, Rita was sent to prison on Halloween; by the time, she received her reception phone call her children had gone out 'trick or treating' with her friend:

I was so upset but yet so grateful—I was glad for them that they were able to carry on as normal and apparently manage without me—but at the same time I was gutted for me because I wanted them to miss me ... Isn't that selfish? ... I felt so guilty for feeling like it. (Rita, 35, mother of four)

Shanice described similar conflicting emotions. Her daughters were in the care of her grandmother, whilst Shanice was 'very grateful' to her mother for 'taking in' her daughters; she also felt jealous and resentful. Shanice provided many examples where she felt her mothering emotions impacted on her emotional wellbeing and ability to cope with her sentence. One such example:

I would say to Aisha, 'Oh go get your homework and I'll help you over the phone' ... she'd say 'No it's OK Nanny's done it.' Or maybe on a visit I would want to do her hair different and she'd say 'No mummy, Nanny did it like this and I like it' ... I felt pointless. (Shanice, 30, mother of two)

This basic need to mother and the impact of not being able to complete everyday mothering tasks is additionally painfully and poignantly illustrated by one mother:

One day, when I phoned home, my middle daughter came on the phone sobbing, absolutely sobbing ... you know those big breathy sobs like when you can't catch your breath. I was terrified, and was like—'Oh darling! What's the matter?—Tell me what's wrong' ... She went on to tell me that her leotard wasn't clean and she needed it for a gymnastics competition. There was no soap powder in the house and Daddy didn't know what to do ... I told her to check if there was shampoo in the house to wash it with or to pop next door and ask to borrow a cup of powder. She went off the phone relatively happy and purposeful ... but me ... God I came off that phone so upset ... It was such a small thing ... but it broke me, ... I felt so angry ... angry with myself, angry with him [for not solving the problem] and just...well just powerless ... hopeless ... disconnected ... it was just awful. I went quiet for a while after that. I think that's when it hit me you know ... when I knew I was a bad mother ... once I knew I wasn't a good mother ... nothing else about me made sense. (Ursula, 48)³⁷

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Impact on Relationships

Several mothers in the study talked of how tension, built up between themselves as mothers, and those who were caring for their children (often grandmothers) whilst they were incarcerated carried on after they were released. Some recounted that their relationships with their own mothers and mothers-in-law remained at least tense, and were sometimes broken or thus altered permanently. Two of the grandmothers (mothers of mothers in the study) were unwilling to return the children to their mothers, and three others now shared the care of their grandchildren with their

35. See 17 also.

36. See 33 also.

37. See 2 also.

mothers, despite the mothers being released and wishing to resume full-time care.

My mother refuses to trust me to have them—even though social services say I can have the kids—my mum keeps the two youngest, I see them every day but she won't let me live with them, or them with me—she says if I kick off she will tell social services, so I have no choice ... that's the worst thing after prison, no one ever trusts you again. (Tamika, 26, mum of three)

Mothers remembered feeling during incarceration that everything would be 'OK' or 'back to normal' when they were released. Thus, many mothers described feeling unprepared for the 'emotional explosion' (Ursula, 48, mother of four) they faced on release. Instead, mothers were faced with the reality that it often wasn't 'back to normal' or the same as before they went into custody. In this study this seemed particularly relevant when the children were experiencing or had experienced puberty whilst mum was in prison. Many of the mothers described their relationships with their children as 'forever changed', something they found especially difficult to accept and cope with. Shanice describes the sadness she feels surrounding her and her teenage daughter's changed relationship:

I used to worry all the time when I was inside ... Where was she? Who was she with? Was she safe? I kept myself going thinking: Not long now, then it will all be OK and I can keep an eye on her properly ... But she doesn't tell me anything now ... we don't have the same relationship as before. She got used to being without me I guess ... I wasn't expecting that. (Shanice, 30, mum of two)

Mothers of younger children faced equally difficult emotional challenges, especially if contact was minimal and the children were very young. There were fears of being 'forgotten' or 'displaced' (and replaced). One young mother, Beth, was sent to prison when her baby was only three months old. Beth served four months and did not have visits from her child whilst in prison. Her child was taken into care and she now sees her via supervised visits. Beth feels she 'doesn't know' her child and that her child has no bond with her. Beth is pessimistic about this ever changing and thus is struggling to manage her emotions on release. She self-reports that substances have always been her way of 'dealing with, or rather, not dealing with' the pain and trauma in her life. In interview, Beth described how the additional emotions she felt as a 'failed mother' were making it increasingly likely she would return to substance misuse (and therefore offending) to cope with her emotions. She described feeling that either a return to prison or suicide could be a likely outcome for her.

I feel guilty every time I look at her, she don't want me—she cries as soon as I hold her ... and all that does is remind me of how crap I am ... at everything, but especially at being a mum... on drugs I can forget it all ... when I'm off my face is the only time I can like myself even a little bit, sometimes I don't even want to be here no more, ... What's the point now? (Beth, 19, mum of one)

Conclusion

This paper, via the powerful voices and memories of the mothers, highlights the effects of prison, specifically in terms of maternal identity, are profound. These effects are long lasting and certainly well beyond the reach of the prison walls. Mothers described feeling guilt and shame whilst in prison, which was compounded after their release. The mothers felt they fell far short of the mothering ideals generally accepted by society, they felt like 'failures' as mothers, forever tarnished by the fact they had been to prison as mothers. Illustrated poignantly by Kady:

I'm tainted now ain't I? Forever ... I'll always be that mum that went jail. Every time I hear that song 'Tainted Love' ... I think that's me that is. (Kady, 26, mother of one)

Mothers in the study described how the longed-for release brought additional issues, not always anticipated. Their relationships with their children, and indeed wider family, were sometimes 'forever changed' because of losing their mother role to a greater or lesser degree; leaving mothers with a myriad of emotions to deal with amid their resettlement. Mothers described struggling so much with their maternal emotions, both during custody and post release, to such a degree they would sometimes feel overwhelmed, even suicidal. With self-harm incidents and deaths in custody at their highest ever level, such overt cries for help must be heard. If we are to continue to send mothers to prison, and arguably the preferred option is wherever possible we don't; then more must be done to support mothers and children affected by the criminal justice system. This paper highlights the relevance and importance of emotionally supporting mothers both during the custodial period, and importantly, post release in the community. Working with mothers and assisting them to maintain an active mothering role during their sentence will prove beneficial in terms of maintaining relationships. Supporting mothers and families in the often challenging period of re-integration, will assist successful resettlement. Failure to do so may impact negatively, not only positive outcomes for mothers themselves, but also on the mothers' ability to engage in sentence planning/supervision and therefore desistance. Which ultimately will further impact on the children and wider society as a whole.