

# Mothers in Prison

Lucy Baldwin writes on the importance of working with maternal emotion compassionately

*"When the cell door locked, I was alone, alone with my guilt, my shame as a mother, and my photos ... I just couldn't see how I'd get through two years ...so that's when I did it, I made a noose..."* (Jameila, 29, mother of three)

**A**cross the whole of the prison estate, deaths in custody are the highest ever recorded. In 2016, 342 prisoners in total lost their lives, with at least 111 of those being self-inflicted [Figures by INQUEST accessed at - <http://www.inquest.org.uk/statistics/deaths-in-prison>].

## Self Harm

Self-harm incidents in prison are also at the highest levels ever recorded, with a more than 40% rise since 2013 [See Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefings 2015 <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/summer%202016%20briefing.pdf>]. Despite women making up less than 5% of the prison population, women make up nearly a quarter of all recorded self-harm incidents across the whole estate, and 12% of deaths in custody.

There are many factors which must play a part in the horrific and unacceptable rise in these statistics. Not the least of which is the horribly incompatible partnership of overcrowding and understaffing. Prisoners are being locked away in their cells far longer and far more often than is ideal or recommended, leaving prisoners angry, resentful and isolated, and leaving staff also equally angry, resentful and demotivated. This far less than ideal situation leaves both parties vulnerable, staff are vulnerable to the repercussions, physically and mentally of working in a challenging environment with justifiably angry, sometimes volatile and violent prisoners – and prisoners are vulnerable because they do not have access to adequate support or time out from their cells. Obviously, this highly unacceptable situation is one which needs to be addressed across the whole estate if we are to see a reduction in self-harm incidents and suicides; however, this article intends to focus specifically on the importance working positively with the emotions of mothers, without denying the significance for men of being a father in prison too.

This article draws on the ongoing Doctoral research of the author, which aims to explore the emotional impact of incarceration on mothers [Mothering Disrupted: An Interpretivist Study Exploring the Emotional Impact of



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Imprisonment on Mothers. De Montfort University. (2014-ongoing)].

The opening quote illustrates poignantly the emotional turmoil of being a mother in prison. When a father is imprisoned most children remain in their own home and are looked after by their mother. Only 5% of children of imprisoned mothers remain in their own homes, with only 9% being looked after by their fathers and 14% going straight into the care of the local authority [Minson, S, Nadine, Earle, J. *The Sentencing of Mothers* (2015) Prison Reform Trust. [http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/sentencing\\_mothers.pdf](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/sentencing_mothers.pdf)].

## Vulnerable Population

For many women being imprisoned is the first significant period away from their children. Additionally, because there are far fewer female prisons, many mothers are placed between 50-150 miles away from home (there are no female prisons in Wales or on the Isle of Wight for example). We know that women who enter prison are already a vulnerable population, with most having experienced abuse, both as a child and as an adult. We know that 46% of women in prison have previously attempted suicide and that many will have substance misuse and mental health issues. We also know that for many the mental health issues and the substance misuse are often the result of trauma and pain in their lives [Corston, J (2007) *A Review of Women with Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*. MoJ. <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf>].

Imagine then “managing” all of this and then entering prison, especially if for the first time – and being separated from one’s children. It is perhaps not difficult to imagine the emotional trauma one might feel in such circumstances. The value of a compassionate first night centre is not difficult to appreciate and is illustrated by a still breastfeeding mother in the current study, who was sent to prison for shoplifting when her child was three months old;

*“I felt desperate, my milk was leaking, aching for my baby, I felt pointless, she wasn’t even going to remember me, if it weren’t for the staff being on it that first night I’d have done it, topped myself – I just couldn’t see beyond that night”* (Beth, aged 19, mother of one)

By “on it” Beth clarified that she was referring to the kindness and presence of the staff in the first night centre (where the staff/prisoner ratio is often higher than normal location). But what comes after that first night – when the reality of separation hits, the mother’s emotions heightened by her own sense of failure? When the pain of separation mixed with the sense of failure as a mother, creates a melting pot of emotion, or as one mother described herself “like a pressure cooker” with the potential to blow.

Baldwin [Baldwin (2015), *Mothering Justice: Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings*. Waterside Press], highlights the importance of recognising the “additional layer” of motherhood and mothering emotions when working with women in prison. Arguing that failing to do so renders mothers in prison vulnerable to self-harm and suicide at the worst, but at the least to unnecessary emotional trauma that can have an impact on mothers themselves, their relationships with others, their children and *ergo* with society for generations to come. Mary, speaking long after her sentence ended illustrates exactly how that might happen.

*“I couldn’t cope with my emotions, it was too hard to think about them let alone see them, the only way I could cope was to cut them off, my emotions and my boys – I just couldn’t deal with what it felt like – I know I failed them, the minute I went in there I failed them. They ended up getting fostered and when they got into bother themselves and got locked up .... well I just blamed myself really ... I hated myself ...cutting myself was no less than I deserved”* (Mary, mother of two boys),

From the research, Baldwin (2015) suggests that the emotional impact of being an incarcerated mother is deeply felt, not least because of the “ideas and ideals” of motherhood that tell us what a “good” mother should look like. Certainly, the commonly held public view would be that “good” mothers don’t go to prison. Corston suggested that the very fact a mother may find herself in prison renders her a “bad” mother – not only in the eyes of society, but importantly in the eyes of the mother herself. Therefore, mothers are often dealing, not only with the trauma and disadvantage of the lifestyle that brought them to prison and the separation from their children, but additionally the impact of self-blame and shame as “failed mothers”. Mothers

in the research described how this pain could be made worse (or better) by a variety of factors, not least how they were responded to by staff. Indeed, both Jameila and Beth go on to say in their interviews, that it was the intervention of staff that prevented them from following through their suicidal thoughts. Both women have now been out of prison some time. They were imprisoned at a time when the prisons were less overcrowded and arguably staff had more time to carry out the additionally pastoral aspects of their role – importantly the parts that many enter the profession for – to make a difference, to rehabilitate, to understand. Women in this study described how positive relationships between themselves as mothers and with staff, was a significant factor in their “coping with the time or not”. Conversely women in the study described how less positive experiences with staff also had an impact on their emotions and *ergo* their emotional management.

*“they made me feel shit as a mam, after a visit when my little one came, one of the officers locking me back up after said to me ... she is lovely, she deserves better than you .... I was gobsmacked.... I hadn’t self-harmed for years before that, but then it became a regular thing ... you can see the judgment in their faces sometimes ... even if they don’t say anything ...it just makes us feel worse ... but maybe that’s the point”* (Tanya, 26, mother of one)

Mothers come to prison, a place one mother in the research called a “place of shame” from court, a place where arguably their misdemeanours and mistakes are “on show”. Where they are judged, often not only on their crime, but in their roles as mothers (See “Rules of Confinement” also *CL&J* March 2015, (2015) 179 JPN 195-197), [Rules of Confinement: Time for Changing the Game.<https://www.criminallawandjustice.co.uk/features/Rules-Confinement-%E2%80%93Time-Changing-Game>]. Mothers in the study described feeling the additional judgment once in prison “a place of shame” as a heavy weight, and one that affected their ability to cope with their emotions and the ongoing separation from their children.

Mothers described how the conditions in which they were held was significant in terms of their emotional management. In closed conditions mothers stated it was much harder to seek the support of each other in terms of their mothering emotions. The women knew each other less well as they had much less association time, and so were nervous of raising such difficult conversations, thereby often struggling to deal with their emotions alone in their cells. One mother stated that she really understood why women in closed conditions killed themselves and stated that if she had remained in closed conditions much longer herself it was a course of action she might have followed [Baldwin, L. *Motherhood Disrupted: Reflections of Post-Prison Mothers*. Submitted to *Emotion*, submitted to *Space and Society*. Elsevier]. She goes on to say;

*“In open we could spend time with each other, share photos and memories away from the staff, for a short time we could just be mums talking to other mum about our kids”* (Rita, 35, mother of 4).

When we consider that over 80% of women are in prison for non-violent offences, that for women escape from prison is almost unheard of, one must 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. Or as one mother rather succinctly puts it when questioning the logic of being placed in closed conditions.

*"What where we going to do, shoplift of fraud them to death?"* (Rita, 35) [See above also].

Closed conditions not only impact on the mothers themselves, but additionally on their children in terms of regularity and accessibility of contact by phone, and even quality of contact on visits. For example, mothers described in closed conditions how they were not allowed their children on their knees, hugging was not permitted beyond hello, and mothers were not allowed out of their seats – even if for example a small child might fall over or wander off in the visiting hall. Mothers described how their emotions post visits would be especially high and when they would often feel at their most vulnerable.

Mothers in the study described how the level of their coping with the separation from their children, would have some relevance for how "engaged" they were, in rehabilitation work, sentence planning and even simply with staff. Mothers who were struggling to deal with their emotions related to separation, or who were constantly worrying about their children felt unable to focus on anything but their children. For example, Kady, who was frustrated at being forced back to "work" only six weeks after giving birth, leaving her daughter on the MBU (close to education classrooms) said:

*"I was sat in education with milk seeping through my top, hearing my baby scream and not being allowed to go to her – how am I meant to concentrate – how am I meant to not kick off?"* (Kady, 28, mother of one)

Another mother described finding out that her teenage daughter was the victim of bullies, targeting her because she had a mother in prison, this left her feeling guilty, ashamed

and highly emotional. This mother, who normally was positive and engaged in sentence planning, felt unable to concentrate asked for a meeting to be rescheduled until she had been able to speak with her daughter again. Her request was refused, this resulted in a volatile meeting after which the mother self-harmed in her cell.

The mothers included in this paper highlight the importance of recognising, understanding and supporting the emotional needs of mothers in prison and the potential consequences of failing to do so. Thus, illustrating how vital it is to support the prisons and prison staff in terms of resources to ensure prisons and prisoners are safe. There can be little doubt that a well-run, well-resourced prison saves lives. Recent drives for prisons to become "trauma informed" [See "One Small Thing". enabling the prison estate to become trauma informed <http://www.onesmallthing.org.uk/about/>], need to be additionally informed by the specific needs of incarcerated mothers. Thought needs to be given as to the "need" for women to be held in closed conditions which then impacts not only on their own ability to seek support, but on the type and regularity of visits with children – which again has significant emotional relevance to mothers. Finally, there must be continued efforts to reduce the number of mothers in prison. Under transforming rehabilitation, we are seeing ever more increasing numbers of women returning time and time again to prison for breaches when arguably they have been set up to fail.

Surely preventing more women from going to prison in the first instance is preferable in terms of maximising the potential for desistance and minimising the substantial further emotion harm to mother and their children. This would greatly benefit society in both the long and the short term economically as well as holistically. Thus, meaning that for the few women that might "need" to be in prison, ensuring the prison is safe and adequately staffed and resourced to a level that that women can be emotionally as well practically supported.

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