

# Why education in women's prisons is not fit for purpose

“Unless something is done, female prison leavers will be ill-equipped to deal with the triple discrimination against their gender, criminal record and lack of formal qualifications”

Ask anyone if they believe men and women should receive a separate and unequal education, and most would say no. However, the equality of rights we so often take for granted is deliberately withheld from female prisoners, who often make up the most vulnerable members of our society, meaning a large gender gap exists in male and female prisoners' access to education.

The female prison population, though it has more than doubled since 1993, hovers just under the 4,000 mark. Despite their low numbers, women in prison form a diverse group, representing various cultures and a broad range of educational achievements and socioeconomic statuses. Of the 2,169 newly arrived prisoners in England and Wales surveyed in 2014, 75 per cent of them owned or rented their home, while 53 per cent of the overall prison population reported having educational qualifications.

For all that, a perception exists of prisoners that assumes they all lack basic literacy skills or even the ability to “clean a toilet.” These ill-formed beliefs have often been repeated at the highest level, and it was no surprise that when Jean Corston was first commissioned by the Home Office to carry out a **review** of women in prison in 2006, the eponymous report played a part in forcing female prisoners into tired gender roles.

Following the deaths of six women in HMP Styal between 2002 and 2003, British prisons began to wake up to the realisation that women should not be treated “as add-ons to the male system.” Questions as to what a woman-centred approach to education and rehabilitation should look like were soon asked. However, prisons' paternalist attitude towards female prisoners, that views most of them as prone to distress when set with ambitious educational

targets, meant that systemic gender bias was wrapped up and presented under the guise of female empowerment when changes to the female prison curriculum were made.

In contrast to male prisoners, who are encouraged to pursue vocational courses like radio production, coding and graphics—courses that have the potential to lead to employment—the emphasis on life skills meant women were pushed to participate in artistic confidence-building exercises such as miming, clowning and dance, seemingly to the exclusion of everything else.

Fast forward 13 years and the situation has hardly changed. The education courses listed on the websites of the UK's 12 female prisons range from adult literacy and numeracy to degree-level courses. However, as a 2016 [report](#) makes plain, most women encounter the glass ceiling when attempting to study a course that goes beyond basic English and maths. This is despite the fact [research](#) has shown that prisoners who report holding school-level qualifications such as GCSE and A Levels were more likely to be in employment shortly after release, compared with those who did not.

Organisations that support women caught up in the criminal justice system continue [to assert](#) “that women who offend do far better in a gender specific service.” To that end, cleaning, hairdressing and beauty courses take precedence over traditional academic subjects. HMP Downview, a closed women's prison based in Surrey, was criticised by the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in 2017 for failing to provide more education courses beyond Level 3 (A-level standard and beyond) and for [technical problems](#) that prevented women from being able to complete their distance learning courses.

Women's prisons' hostile attitude to higher learning is reflected in the academic performance of the 388 female prisoners, who from 2013 to 2018 chose to undertake a degree via the Open University: the main provider of higher education in prisons. In 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2018, exactly 0 per cent graduated with a 2:1 or higher, according to the response I received from an FoI request submitted in May 2019.

Presently, 60 per cent of all prisoners leave without an identified education outcome, even though education has been proven to reduce reoffending, whose total cost to the exchequer stands somewhere between £9.5bn to £13bn a year. Poor education provision in prisons affects women the worst. Despite the female prison population being relatively young, only **8 per cent** of female prison leavers re-enter the labour market and they are still 50 per cent more likely than male prisoners to be on out-of-work benefits two years after release.

For education to stand any prospect of closing the revolving door of female reoffending, there needs to be a change in how female prisoners are perceived. It's been proven time and time again that a one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation doesn't work, so why do we continue to treat women like this when it comes to their education? The "*need to treat [female prisoners] differently to create equality*" **mentality**, that has remained in vogue for decades because even now criminal justice advocates maintain that women's menstrual cycles make them more emotional, has set gender equality in British prisons back decades. Unless something is done, female prison leavers will be ill-equipped to deal with the triple discrimination they'll experience on release on account of their gender, criminal record and lack of formal qualifications, meaning the whole cycle of reoffending is likely to start all over again.