

## **Written evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust**

### **Women in Prison**

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET)<sup>1</sup> works with all prisons across England and Wales, funding distance-learning courses in levels and subjects which learners would otherwise be unable to access in prison. Since 1989, we have given more than 43,000 awards to people in prison – equipping them with skills and qualifications to build brighter futures. We also carry out policy work, evaluating and monitoring the quality of education in prisons. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and have restricted our response to our areas of expertise.

Every year, PET funds over 200 women in prison to take distance-learning courses, offering the same courses to both the male and female estate. Some of the women we have funded use what they learn to support others– from founding charities helping women after release, to supporting young people caught up in crime. Completing education in prison can be a huge boost to self-confidence for women, particularly those who might not have thought that educational achievements were possible for them. This self-belief can begin to open doors for women – further study, training or taking on a more responsible role in the prison.

This submission covers the following areas:

- Education as a protective factor including reducing risk of reoffending and benefits for mental health and wellbeing
- The challenges of delivering education in prison including delivery for women with different sentence lengths and academic levels, the curriculum, access to digital technology, education for Welsh women in prison and resource and infrastructure
- Release, resettlement and finding employment

### **Background**

Reducing women's offending, and consequent imprisonment will only happen when adequate resources and effective systems are in place to divert women from the criminal justice system. Funding for community penalties that are trusted and utilised by sentencers and funding for women's centres and residential support outside of prison are essential.

Women in prison remain disadvantaged through their minority status in the criminal justice system and by living in a system designed by and for men. Security constraints that are necessary in the male estate are often disproportionate in women's prisons. Most women in prison do not need to be held in the equivalent of cat A or B conditions and could be held in lower secure or open conditions without risk. Increasing the numbers of resettlement and open units in the female estate would be extremely beneficial in reducing disproportionate restrictions on women and opening new possibilities around studying, training and work. There is much innovative and progressive work in the women's estate, but pilots and initiatives are not always sustainably resourced or rolled out nationally.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/>

## **Education as a protective factor and a whole person approach**

In the criminal justice system generally, and particularly in prisons, there is not enough recognition of education as a protective factor. Education is an intervention that can build resilience and create autonomy, both of which are important to women. There is clear evidence that education can support a reduction in reoffending, but despite this, it is not always considered part of rehabilitation. The link between accessing education in prison reducing reoffending and accessing employment are strong. Recent Justice Data Lab results<sup>2</sup> show that 18% of adults who received grants for distance learning through PET reoffended within a year of release as compared to a comparison group of 23%. And 40% had a job a year after release, which is significantly more than the comparison group of 33%.

Supporting women through education that leads to work creates financial independence meaning less likelihood of being drawn into coercive and controlling relationships. There are strong links between peers, partners and family offending behaviour and the reasons women become involved in crime. In addition, 38% of women attributed their offending to ‘a need to support their children’.<sup>3</sup> Providing women not just with information and support but also with the assertiveness, initiative and means to access support themselves is fundamentally important.

In 2018, the Ministry of Justice reported that 40% of women (compared to 35% of men) in custody were identified as ‘having a learning difficulty/challenge’.<sup>4</sup> Despite the commitments in the Female Offender Strategy and the focus on the drivers that may lead women into crime, too little is known about women with additional learning needs in prison. Women with learning disabilities are more likely to experience domestic or intimate partner violence than women without a learning disability. The abuse experienced can be wider than the ‘usual’ physical, financial, sexual and psychological or emotional abuse, including threats to leave that may inhibit independent living and result in institutionalisation.<sup>5</sup>

Education also has the potential to support emotional wellbeing and mental health. Women in prison are over twice as likely as men to be identified as suffering from anxiety and depression, (49% of women and 23% of men). Low confidence levels and a lack of self-esteem, challenges with concentrating and trauma can impact on women’s access to, engagement with and participation in education. Therefore, recognising women’s previous life experiences, often including extreme levels of abuse, is important. There are some positive approaches to education in women’s prison that use trauma informed approaches, and these should be encouraged and resourced.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/2021/01/government-research-impact-of-prison-education-goes-beyond-finding-work/>

<sup>3</sup> Caddle, D. and Crisp, D. (1997) *Imprisoned women and mothers*, London: Home Office

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice (2019) *Community Performance Quarterly*, update to March 2019, Offender Employment Circumstance table (April 2017 to March 2019), London: MoJ

<sup>5</sup> McCarthy, M, Hunt, S., and Milne-Skillman, K. (2017) ‘I Know It Was Every Week, But I Can’t Be Sure If It Was Every Day: Domestic Violence And Women With Learning Disabilities’, *Journal of Applied Social Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 30 pp. 269-282

## **Education delivery and the challenges of meeting women's needs**

Three quarters (73%) of prison sentences given to women are for six months or less, which also have the highest reoffending rates.<sup>6</sup> Some women who have breached licences serve 14-28 days consequently and women can also be remanded for short periods. There is an assumption that these custodial periods are too short to engage in the education or training or work opportunities available. At any one time, one-third of the population at HMP Bronzefield have been sentenced to three weeks or less and the prison has developed an induction program that can be delivered in ten days. HMP Low Newton had developed a short induction course<sup>7</sup>, but changes to the education contract and a consequent reduction in staff meant that this did not continue. While it is possible to provide meaningful activity for women who are in custody for short periods, it is resource intensive and rare. Short periods in prison are not justified in terms of the extreme disruption and damage to women's lives. We strongly support the call for women not to be sent to prison unnecessarily or for short periods of time.

Many women have told us that initial education assessments take place at a time when they are in 'entry shock' and reeling from having been sent to prison. Women tell us that they cannot focus on the task because of worries about their family. Research<sup>8</sup> shows that women are often unable to participate fully in prison activities while their overriding concern is the safety and welfare of their children.

## **Education provision and sentence length**

Around 1500 women (a third of the women's population) have a longer sentence<sup>9</sup> and provision for their education needs is generally poor. Data on women's prior attainment levels is unclear and no information about any educational progression while in prison has been published for three years. Although a minority of women enter prison with qualifications at level 2 or above, many achieve this level whilst in custody and reach a ceiling where no further progress is possible. Often women feel frustrated by the emphasis placed on basic skills and low-level education, with limited further opportunities.<sup>10</sup> In some instances women who complete Level 2 qualifications are offered no further opportunities to progress and instead were asked to be classroom assistants.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Justice (2019) Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2018 Court Outcomes by Police Force Area data tool, London: MoJ

<sup>7</sup> HMP Low Newton they have a one-week education induction where the women reflect on their early experiences of education, talk through their fears and anxieties, discuss their interests and are helped to think about ambitions and then develop a learning plan. They take time through one to ones and group work to get to know 'the whole person'

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/Pact%20-%20final%20with%20cover.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> sentence of 4 years or more, or an IPP or life sentence

<sup>10</sup> O'Keefe (2003) *Moving Mountains: Identifying and addressing barriers to employment, training and education from the voices of women (ex) offenders*, Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

<sup>11</sup> Dixon, A. and Jones, E. (2013) *Learning for Women in Prison. Report on the role of learning and skills in responding positively to the issues and circumstances faced by women in prison*, The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England and Wales

## **Opportunities for higher- level learning**

Ofsted reports are generally more positive for women's prisons compared to men's establishments and usually find there are enough core day activity spaces and good attendance at education. However, there is still a regular criticism that the curriculum is too narrow with insufficient provisions of higher-level courses. In addition, more resource is needed for creative and recreational activities. The latest inspectorate annual report says that 'Some prisons offered a range of recreational activities, although more was needed to occupy prisoners purposefully in their spare time'.

Prison education departments struggle to balance providing education at all levels and to women serving from 10 days to 25 years. It is notable that in 2016/17, 90% of women who registered with Working Chance<sup>12</sup> had UK qualifications and 21% were university graduates<sup>13</sup>. This is not a representative sample but highlights the range of qualifications amongst women in the criminal justice system.

PET and the Open University provide higher-level courses, but the processes for acquiring information about applying for these courses are not systematic and funding can be hard to access. There is not always adequate support for women to study individually and our experience is that women often benefit from small group and peer support, study skills workshops and other activities that build confidence and motivation when studying.

We also support the development of prison-university partnerships and working with other agencies to enhance the education offer through our network of organisations delivering this work. HMP Downview works with the University of Greenwich to run a university level module and HMP Send with the University of Surrey. These courses open opportunities for women that would not happen otherwise, and we believe that HMPPS should develop this provision further through a national strategic approach to working with universities.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, education has been provided through in-cell materials. While there has been some innovative practice around using in-cell television and radio, and some good quality printed materials are available, we remain concerned about this provision. It is not suitable for all women, particularly those with additional needs. Women benefit from group work and socialisation, and in-cell materials cannot provide the transferable skills women need to develop confidence and employability.

## **Digital Technology**

The lack of digital technology in prisons reduces all learner's life-chances. Many women in prison do not have adequate digital literacy and we are concerned that learners cannot always access the Essential Digital Skills support and qualifications needed for everyday life and for many jobs. Access to the internet is another area where women are additionally disadvantaged due to security concerns that really relate to men. Women are rarely convicted of internet offences and the vast majority could safely access restricted internet without substantial risks. Access to the Virtual Campus in education departments and libraries should be maximised. In-cell technology would enable differentiation and a personalised education

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://workingchance.org/about-us/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Working%20it%20Out%20FINAL%20NEW.pdf> page 13

service and facilitate self-study, opening more course opportunities to women who would otherwise not be able to access courses at the right levels and subjects.

## **Curriculum**

Women are underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering and mathematics (STEM), construction and the digital industries. Prison education departments have an opportunity to engage women in training and careers they have not considered or known about before. Women who study with PET have a wide range of options for course choice and many study 'non-traditional' subjects. Course choices in prisons can be limited and there is an absence of options such as bricklaying or construction. 'Multi- skills' programmes, which cover household maintenance and repairs, support the development of self-reliance and independence and are available in some prisons and are popular.

Although hair and beauty training in women's prisons may seem like a stereotypical approach to educating women, it fulfils a useful function. Trauma experienced through domestic or sexual abuse can impact on body-image and self-image. Programmes that recognise this – assertiveness classes in education, health and fitness in the gym, and access to a beauty salon in the prison – can build self-esteem and confidence. Taking part in these activities in a safe and supportive environment can be empowering and help women develop the life skills necessary for successful resettlement. In some women's prisons, the beauty salon provides a real working environment with professional standards and qualifications that women can use to become self-employed, which can support women who need flexibility due to caring commitments.

Where women do have access to a wider range of learning opportunities they benefit enormously. Research carried out by PET<sup>14</sup> showed the benefits of sports-based learning for women prisoners<sup>1</sup>. Research also carried out by the Learning and Skills Council identified the importance of sport and recreational skills as a first step to building women's self-confidence<sup>15</sup>

## **Education for Welsh women in prison**

PET's Welsh Prisons Project offers enhanced support to distance learners in Welsh prisons and to women in HMP Eastwood Park. In March 2019, a review of prison education in Wales found that the most concerning area was education for women. Women from Wales will usually be held in HMPs Styal or Eastwood Park, as there is no women's prison in Wales. The review found that 'constitutional walls have been constructed stopping women from getting access to educational services they need'. The report recommended that the Welsh Government should collate data on women, including that on resettlement and education needs, which should inform an education strategy. Welsh Government and HMPPS in Wales should work with MoJ to ensure there is parity of provision with that delivered to male prisoners in Welsh prisons including access to Welsh Language materials where required. The Welsh Government has committed to creating better support for Welsh women in

---

<sup>14</sup> Meek, R., Champion, N., & Klier, S (2012). Fit for Release. Prisoners Education Trust.

<sup>15</sup> Walker E, Deane H & Patterson G. (2006) Maximising the benefits of OLASS for female offenders: an evaluation of the issues, 9-32, LSC research report.

English prisons, but these plans have been impacted by Covid-19 and the links are not yet embedded.

### **Resources and infrastructure**

Women's prisons, like the rest of the estate, are subject to understaffing, overcrowding and years of under investment and austerity. Some prisons like HMP Downview in Surrey have found it hard to recruit workshop instructors and tutors meaning courses cannot run and good facilities are sometimes empty. The Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) at HMP Eastwood Park reported that the development of vocational training and work was greatly impeded by lack of space and skills-specific areas in which to expand and offer additional opportunities, including continuing local contracts for assembly and packaging. The prison could also not offer skills/qualifications providing access to less stereotypical female careers/roles (for example, construction or engineering) because of a lack of specialist accommodation, staffing and facilities.<sup>16</sup> Last year, the IMB at HMP Low Newton noted serious problems in various parts of the prison with the roofs leaking water which, as a result has restricted the availability of education classrooms and workshops.<sup>17</sup>

### **Release, resettlement and finding employment**

Women have told us that employability may not be their priority on release, particularly if they need to access accommodation children to return to living with them, or for any number of other family or personal health reasons. The focus on employability means that practices and policies do not always adequately support women and their specific needs. It is notable that just 4% of women were in paid employment six weeks after release from custody—compared to 10% of men. If this situation is to improve women need access to good quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that is aspirational, realistic and holistic.

There are numerous challenges for women leaving prison and entering the job market, particularly those with children. The Department of Work and Pensions found four out of five employers failed to provide a special recruitment process for disadvantaged groups, including women leaving prison.<sup>18</sup> In the UK, eight times as many women as men are not in paid employment due to caring responsibilities for children and others.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, as a result of the concentration of women in the labour market, DBS checks have an elevated impact on women. The most common industries for women's employment are health and social work (21%), wholesale and retail trade (14%) and education (12%). Overall, 79% and 70% of jobs in health and social work and education respectively are held by women, and most of these positions are eligible for enhanced criminal record checks.

---

<sup>16</sup> Independent Monitoring Boards (2021) Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP and YOI Eastwood Park for reporting year 1 November 2019 to 31 October 2020, available at: <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/imb-prod-storage-1ocod6bqky0vo/uploads/2021/02/EWP-IMB-2019-20-Annual-Report-for-circulation.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Independent Monitoring Boards (2020) Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP and YOI Low Newton for reporting year 1 March 2019 to 29 February 2020, available at: <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/imb-prod-storage-1ocod6bqky0vo/uploads/2020/07/Low-Newton-AR-19-20-for-circulation.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 1 Department for Work and Pensions (2019) Press Release: From jail to a job: women take bold steps with forward thinking charity, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/from-jail-to-a-job-women-take-bold-steps-with-forward-thinking-charity>

<sup>19</sup> Government Equalities Office (2019) Press Release: Mordaunt launches fund to help isolated and marginalised women return to work, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mordaunt-launches-fund-to-help-isolated-and-marginalised-women-return-to-work>

There is a commitment in the Female Offender Strategy to ensure that the New Futures Network considers the specific needs of women, including their care responsibilities. However, on average, women are held 64 miles from home<sup>20</sup>, and about 650 women are imprisoned over 100 miles from home.<sup>21</sup> This makes it almost impossible to build links with agencies in the areas women are returning to on release.

Increasing use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) would support resettlement outcomes. ROTL is massively underused, although technically all women prisons can facilitate temporary release. Women are more likely than men to be assessed as low-risk, and more likely to be the sole carer of children and so more likely to access ROTL for family reasons. However, between 2007-2017 the use of ROTL for women decreased by 40%, compared to an 18% decrease for men.<sup>22</sup>

ROTL is particularly underused for training and education purposes. A culture that does not always promote aspiration and achievement means that referral routes from prisons to universities and colleges are not always in place. Women are also disadvantaged by changes and restrictions to ROTL that occur because of security concerns more relevant to the male estate. Women are more likely to be far from home and linking to local education, training and employment placements that can continue on release is problematic.

In summary, our recommendations are:

- Building the evidence base. MoJ should publish data on women's prior attainment levels and progression while in prison and more work is needed to identify the needs of women with additional learning needs
- The MoJ should make the case in the forthcoming Spending Review for further investment in prison education, including digital technology.
- HMPPS should review the processes that specifically disadvantage women - disproportionate security arrangements that impede access to course opportunities, digital technology and ROTL and induction assessments could take place once women have received the support they need with childcare and other domestic arrangements,
- HMPPS should expand the curriculum and provide more opportunities for higher-level learning
- HMPPS should develop a strategic approach to resettlement for women, providing motivational and supportive IAG that builds links with employers and education establishments.

Without system change and further resources, educational outcomes for women in prison and on release will remain too poor. Giving women in prison the opportunities they need to develop life skills, and engage in vocational training and academic courses will enable them to fulfil their potential, reduce their risk of reoffending, and benefit individuals and our wider society.

---

<sup>20</sup> Women in Prison (2015) State of the Estate: Women in Prison's report on the women's custodial estate (2nd edition), London: Women in Prison

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Justice (2018) Women in the Criminal Justice System Overview, London: MoJ

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Justice (2018) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017, London: MoJ