'A mother and a prisoner': Maternal experiences of incarceration

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When we think of the Victorian prison, we often conjure up images of castle-like fortresses wherein strict discipline and harsh conditions prevailed for the people behind their high walls. The locking and unlocking of cells punctuated the daily lives of prisoners and every aspect of their routines was governed by a set of rules and regulations intended to uphold the strictest discipline. My research explores what it was like to be pregnant, to have a baby and to be a mother in this carceral space. Focusing upon the period between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, it questions how the presence of pregnant women and new mothers and their babies were not only incorporated spatially into the prison but also the broader legal, medical, practical, social and ideological issues and debates that surrounded the incarceration of mothers.

There is a long and broad history of female criminality being associated with damage inflicted on future generations. Victorian periodicals and contemporary literature was saturated with tales of fallen women, while children were viewed as the collateral damage of their mother's moral and/or criminal degradation. My research questions where we place mothers in prison into this narrative and, crucially, whether this broader context impacted upon the treatment of mothers and their children in the prison setting.

2A class in 'mothercraft' being taught in Birmingham prison in 1952. Image: The National Archives MH55/1572

When they entered the prison, women would undergo a brief, and often very perfunctory, examination by the medical officer. This examination would highlight any medical conditions – including pregnancy – that would then necessitate differential treatment. Physical spaces were incorporated into this penal environment, such as lying-in wards in prison hospitals for childbirth and prison nurseries. In addition, consideration was given to aspects of the prison routine, such as suitable labour tasks, and to the accommodation and diet afforded to pregnant women. Despite these practical, spatial and structural provisions for pregnant

women and mothers, my research explores the more complex picture surrounding the kinds of support and opportunities available to women in their roles as mothers in prison, and in the emotional and physical bonds that they formed with their children.

3 The 'Convict Nursery' at Brixton prison, c. mid-nineteenth century. Image: Henry Mayhew and John Binny, The Criminal Prisons of London (London: 1862)

In prisons in this period, prisoners and staff inhabited close physical quarters, sharing and moving around in small, constricted spaces. At the same time, however, there was a physical and emotional detachment due to prison rules. For mothers, this environment could stifle individual choice and agency during the perinatal period. However, the prison nursery offered something of a refuge to women and an opportunity to bond with their child in an environment that, although still heavily regulated, allowed a greater degree of physical and verbal communication and perhaps even offered new mothers the chance to be part of a community. During a visit to Brixton female prison in 1862, social reformers Henry Mayhew and John Binny remarked that "*there is indeed no place in which there is so much toleration and true wisdom, if not goodness, to be learnt as in the convict nursery at Brixton.*" For mothers in prison, the nursery offered them some opportunity to feed and care for their children. They were also expected to bathe their child and make them clothes.

Across this period there were some voices that acknowledged that a prison sentence was potentially an opportunity to educate women on the values of motherhood and domesticity. For instance, in the nineteenth century, middle-class Lady Visitors and other prison officials attempted to reclaim these women by offering a moral example of ideal femininity. However, the early twentieth century witnessed a shift towards more instructional classes in the care of babies and the mid-twentieth century saw the introduction of classes in 'mothercraft'.

The courses differed slightly in composition in different prisons but there was a notable sharing of expertise between prison officials, organisations such as the

N.S.P.C.C and the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS), the Ministry of Health, local medical authorities and maternity and child welfare services. The courses were taught by a variety of people including health visitors and medical professionals and covered a range of topics such as bathing a baby; clothing and bedding requirements; feeding young children; accidents in the home; simple first aid and the importance of cleanliness and hygiene. In addition, these courses offered more advanced medical advice and education about the stages of pregnancy, foetal development, childbirth, breastfeeding and early child development. These courses can perhaps be viewed as offering a historical legacy for providing mothers in prison with "*the same opportunities and support to nurture and bond with their baby as women in the community*", for which contemporary organisations such as Birth Companions, who have supported pregnant women and women with babies in prison since 1996, have recently been calling.

While my research primarily focuses upon the period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, it seeks to use the historic narrative to reflect upon current issues surrounding motherhood in prison. As part of a series of public engagement activities working with arts organisations and other groups, the key historic themes identified in the research have been used to engage with the ongoing question of how best to support and nurture maternal relationships behind bars, and, crucially, to allow women in prison to also be mothers.

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