

Medical Care, Maternity and Childbirth in Female Prisons, 1850-2000

By Dr Rachel Bennett



The Nursery. Holloway Prison

The Nursery, Holloway Prison. Howard League for Penal Reform, MSS.16A/7/23/1/41. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

Since the creation of the modern prison system, women have been imprisoned separately from their male counterparts.

While some historical attention has been afforded to the running of female-only prisons, and how this differed from the regimes imposed in male prisons, my strand of the project examines if, and how, gender distinctions impacted upon the provision of medical care within female prisons.

It also questions whether prison administrators and prison doctors acknowledged the distinct requirements of

women in the daily running of the prison in terms of such health matters as diet and sanitation. In addition, it examines if responses to a prisoner's physical and mental ill health were differentiated on the basis of gender.

Maternity Care and Childbirth

A major part of this strand focuses upon maternity care and childbirth provisions and practices in women's prisons. The research examines the conditions in which pregnant women were incarcerated. It draws upon evidence showing that the medical examination of women upon entry into the prison was often very brief and perfunctory.

In addition, it shows that, until they were at a very advanced stage of pregnancy women were often subject to the normal prison routine, including being locked in solitary confinement for long periods. This was liable to cause psychological stress exacerbated by the limited availability of emergency attention. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which there were specialised maternity facilities in prison hospitals as well as specially trained staff on hand to offer medical assistance to pregnant women.

Within this, it questions if there were provisions in place for midwifery visits and contact with health visitors, particularly after the turn of the twentieth century.

Conditions within Female Prisons

This research draws upon a variety of source materials, including those offering an official perspective upon medical care in prisons – Prison Governors' Reports, Prison Commission records, Home Office and State Papers and the journals of prison medical officers. Prisoner memoirs also offer day-to-day accounts of prison life and newspapers and medical journals reveal interesting examples of the debates on the reform of medical care in prisons. The standard of medical care that should be afforded to pregnant prisoners and their unborn infants was regularly debated during the twentieth century.

Enquiries into conditions in female prisons offer a unique insight into the emergence of new ideas on female prisoners' entitlement to health. In addition, the research draws upon numerous cases, where the inadequacies of the medical care afforded to female prisoners, particularly in cases of pregnancy, had resulted in the death of mothers and their infants. These cases attracted the attention of the prison authorities, piqued the public's interest and produced responses by reform groups.

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