

## **Book review: Mothering from the inside**

Kelly Lockwood (ed.)

*Mothering from the Inside: Research on motherhood and imprisonment*

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There were 3,136 women in prison at the end of 2020 (Ministry of Justice, 2021). No centralised figures are held for the number of imprisoned mothers but conservative estimates range from 50% to 70% (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011), and this does not include grandmothers, mothers of adult children or women with informal childcare responsibilities. Each time a woman is sentenced to prison or imprisoned on remand, there are far-reaching consequences for everyone in her network of care.

*Mothering from the Inside* brings together a range of perspectives in what is a new contribution to the literature on imprisonment and motherhood, and in which leading UK researchers and third sector practitioners provide a sensitive and humane view of the impact of female imprisonment. The diversity of the chapters means that those who carry out research or work in the area will discover fresh material, whilst the work is accessible enough to those new to the topic. The research has clear links to policy and practice, but its key strength is the simultaneous focus on the specific harms to imprisoned mothers and the associated impact on their children, wider family members and the staff who work with them, along with legal and international perspectives.

The first part of the book follows a temporal structure from the sentencing of mothers to the long-term impact of imprisonment following release. This part is thematically coherent with multiple links between the chapters. The second part covers diverse perspectives of mothering and imprisonment. At first glance, these later chapters appear less related to one another, nevertheless there are subtle links and echoes between them and the first part of the book. The persistent impact of shame and stigma is a common theme throughout and is sensitively approached. So often research about criminalised populations is dehumanising and othering; this collection of research, however, humanises everyone affected by maternal imprisonment.

In Minson's chapter we see how judges' stigmatising views about women living in poverty and ignorance of their wider family situations affect court sentencing. Unsurprisingly, the children in Beresford et al.'s chapter felt judged by everyone around them, and the mothers and grandmothers in Baldwin's chapter experienced 'layers of shame' well beyond their prison sentence. These experiences of shame provide a crossover with the wider literature on marginalised motherhood, particularly relating to those who face challenges from social services or in the mental health system. This is one of the strengths of this collection of research; it is both specific to mothers in prison but more broadly applicable to mothers marginalised by society.

For many women in difficult situations, it is their families who pick up the pieces in the absence of state support, and both Booth and Lockwood address this from two different perspectives outside prisons: from younger children's caregivers and adult children as caregivers. Adult children of women in prison are particularly under-explored in the wider literature as is the long-term view of

motherhood in Baldwin's chapter, which discusses the enduring nature of pain following release, including the ongoing lack of trust in others and change in mothers' relationships.

A complex view of prison and third sector staff is presented. Wood discusses the gender-specific burden on female staff when they share difficult experiences such as miscarriage. Meanwhile, in her overview of international perspectives, Codd mentions the sexual assault and rape of prisoners by prison staff around the world – a topic which is generally avoided. From a third sector perspective, Brookes examines the challenges of working with children whose mothers are in prison and negotiating complex relationships when mothers are released. The strength of including staff and practitioner studies ensure this systemic focus on imprisoned mothers is maintained throughout the book.

As Helen Codd clearly lays out in the final chapter, 'women's experiences of imprisonment are, and always have been, bound up with experiences of motherhood' (p.184). Most women in prisons are mothers and the impact on children is more severe when their mothers, rather than their fathers, are imprisoned because the children usually have to leave their family home. However, by highlighting the wider implications of mothering in prison, this book emphasises the continued need for a gendered lens on prison research. Mothering from the Inside touches on pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, maternity leave, rape, domestic violence and mental health, covering the spectrum of experiences relevant to women in general, but within the specific context of imprisonment.

However, the wide range of perspectives is perhaps the primary weakness. A second volume is needed to understand imprisoned mothers from an intersectional approach. Some aspects were touched upon, but there should be more about mothers (and staff) from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups. We need to understand the experiences of foreign national prisoners and mothers in immigration detention centres, and there could be exploration of the specific needs of mothers with disabilities and those who live with substance misuse so support can be improved. Finally, the voices of lived experience need to be centred. There are several outstanding criminologists with lived experience who could offer this perspective, or chapters could be in partnership with mothers who have been imprisoned.

In conclusion, this edited collection offers a nuanced and complex perspective on motherhood and imprisonment. We are offered insight into the physical and emotional environment of mothering in prison, as well as a systemic lens that enables us both to understand the wider impact of imprisoning women and accordingly, the implications for policy and practice. The collection is framed by two legal perspectives: sentencing in England and Wales and an overview of maternal imprisonment around the world. This forces us to remember that the experience of maternal imprisonment is embedded in a set of social and cultural practices. It is these practices that need changing to enable us to develop human-rights based alternatives to imprisonment.

## References

Howard League for Penal Reform. (2011). *Voice of a child*. Retrieved from: <https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Voice-of-a-Child.pdf>

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