

## Need for a Radical Review of Women's Imprisonment

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Next Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May, a British Labour Peer will be visiting Dublin with a remarkable message. Baroness Jean Corston is due to speak at a public seminar, hosted by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, on the subject of women in prison. She will also be meeting with women members of the Oireachtas for a special briefing on the same subject. Jean Corston was commissioned two years ago by the British Government to undertake a study of women within the criminal justice system in England and Wales. Her report, published in March 2007, carries a truly radical message. She pulled no punches in calling for fundamental changes in the treatment of women offenders, recommending in particular that all existing women's prisons should be replaced with smaller custodial centres within ten years.

As Corston points out, women commit only a very small proportion of crimes generally, and tend to commit offences of theft rather than violence. They present little danger to the public – many women prisoners represent a far greater risk to themselves than to others, and are better described as 'troubled' rather than 'troublesome.' Typically, there are high levels of self-harm and attempted suicide in women's prisons. The cost to society is enormous where women are imprisoned - the direct cost of providing prison places is itself large, but there are also immense indirect costs in terms of family disruption, damage to children and substitute care, lost employment and subsequent mental health problems. Thus, Corston concludes that 'Custodial sentences for women must be reserved for serious and violent offenders who pose a threat to the public.'

This may seem like a statement of the obvious; but it needed to be said, and the report has generated significant debate on the merits of incarcerating women. The British Government has now committed itself to implementation of many key recommendations, and is undertaking a further review to establish whether women's prisons can be phased

out. These developments are very positive, and show that a bold and radical report, based on a well-researched, logical presentation of the evidence, can have a clear impact on policy.

Unfortunately, no such report has ever been commissioned in Ireland, nor has Baroness Corston's message influenced prison policy here. Instead, the Government prison development plans are to double the number of custodial places for women within the next few years. This is truly extraordinary, as it is not based on any logical premise or empirical evidence showing the need for such an increase. In fact, the limited research that has been done on women in Irish prisons shows that female offenders here are just as troubled a group as they are in English prisons. Apart from a tiny minority imprisoned for high profile killings, most are imprisoned for non-violent crimes.

One in-depth study of women prisoners in Mountjoy, for example, found that the majority of crimes they had committed were theft and drug related offences; they were generally from disadvantaged social backgrounds in Dublin's inner city, and had an average of two to three children each. Many were chronic drug users; some were known to be HIV positive; half had a history of psychiatric treatment, and one-third had attempted suicide. The study clearly showed that women prisoners are a particularly vulnerable group in Ireland.

They are also a very small group numerically. The bulk of women prisoners are detained in the Dóchas Centre, a new facility built in 1999, located beside Mountjoy men's prison in Dublin's north inner city. On any given day, 85 women are imprisoned in the Dóchas Centre on average, while 20 more are held in Limerick Prison. This amounts in total to 110 women, only 3 per cent of the overall prison population.

The Government now proposes to move the existing Dóchas Centre to a new, larger, building within the proposed 'super-prison' complex at Thornton Hall in north county Dublin. A second prison for 40 women is proposed for Cork. These plans would provide more than 200 places in total - doubling the capacity for women prisoners in Ireland. It is

well-known that the numbers of those committed to prison will expand to fill the places available – so if these places are built, inevitably more women will be incarcerated every day. The question is, do we really need this extraordinary increase in places for women prisoners?

On any objective basis, the answer must be no. Any rational review of policy would show that most of the women being incarcerated in Irish prisons should not be there. Few are imprisoned for crimes of violence; most are a danger only to themselves. Most require medical intervention, particularly around their drug addiction, and psychiatric treatment is also a real need for many. Most are mothers, and their detention impacts very negatively on the lives of their children. Most are incarcerated for very short periods of time, and many are non-Irish nationals. This is a highly vulnerable population. Something is very wrong with our sentencing policy if these are the women being sent to our prisons. Something is very wrong with our prison policy if it is proposed to send more of these women to our prisons. Baroness Corston's radical message must be heard here in Ireland.