



Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment

Briefing 3: Progression

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About the Prison Reform Trust

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. We have a longstanding interest in improving criminal justice outcomes for women.

About the Building Futures programme

The Building Futures programme is PRT's five-year National Lottery funded programme that is exploring the experiences of people who will spend over eight years in custody. The aim is to improve the experiences of long-term prisoners through advocacy, research and consultation work. A key part of this is developing prisoner leaders who can use their voices to contribute meaningfully to improving the system and the way of life for those serving long sentences.

About this briefing

This briefing is informed by working group discussions, letters and emails from women serving long sentences, and meetings and conversations with prison staff and senior managers. This briefing focuses predominately on the landscape in England and Wales. However, future work will explore the experiences of women in Scotland and Northern Ireland. All names have been changed to protect the identity of contributors.

Credits and acknowledgements

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Introduction

Progression refers to the processes through which people in prison move through the system towards release. This includes engaging in formal programmes and interventions to reduce their risk levels, as well as spending time in different prison spaces, including lower security conditions. Often, progression and risk as concepts are conflated and many prisoners report feeling confused by what is being asked of them. For those serving long sentences, their route to freedom is determined by sentence progression. Therefore, progression is a key concern for people serving long and indeterminate prison sentences. Our previous work has highlighted some challenges faced by long-sentenced prisoners in the male estate, including how prisoners often feel confused and uncertain about how they are meant to progress, and to make positive, productive use of their time. Many prisoners we consulted with noted they spent years – and sometimes decades – feeling stagnant and stuck in the system, unable to engage in meaningful personal development.¹ For women serving long sentences, opportunities for meaningful progression are consistently reported as a major concern. A lack of specialist spaces for long-termers, issues surrounding what programmes are available in each prison, and a lack of tailored support from staff mean many women are at a loss in how to progress through their sentence.

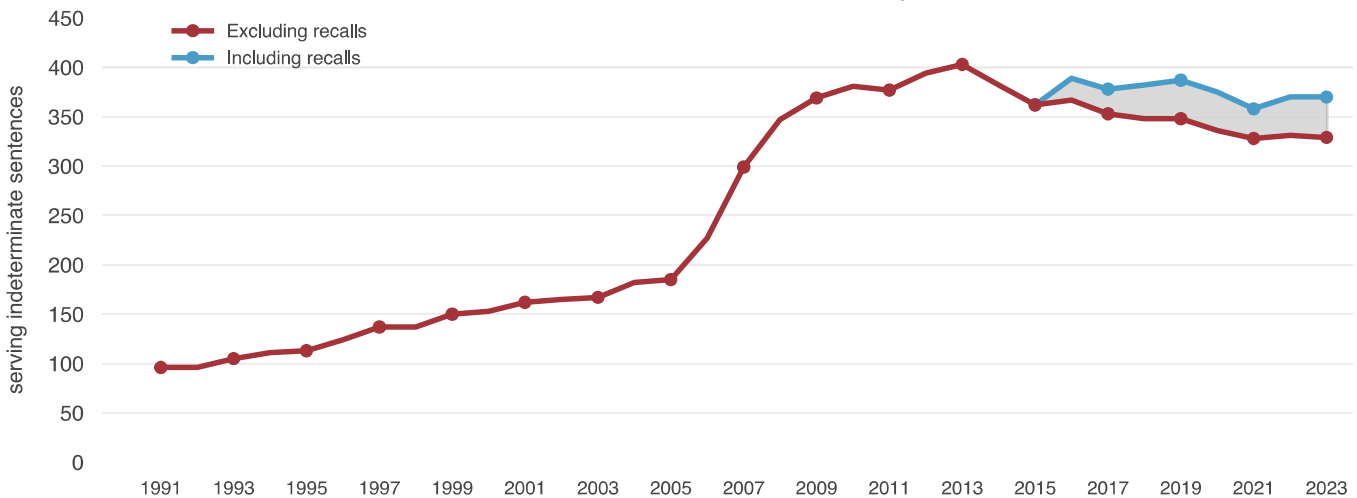
Our third Invisible Women briefing will focus on the lived reality of how it feels as a woman to serve a long prison sentence, paying attention to the ways the prison service does – and does not – equip women to progress through their sentence towards release. The briefing is the result of long-term consultation work with our Building Futures Working Groups in HMPs Send and Bronzefield, ad hoc groups in HMP New Hall, responses to consultation questions from women in our Building Futures Network, and consultation with a woman now living in the community.

Understanding long sentences among women

As has been noted in the previous Invisible Women briefings,² the population of people in women’s prisons serving long sentences has dramatically increased in recent years.

The number of women serving an indeterminate sentence has grown from 96 in 1991, to 381 in September 2023.³

Women in prison serving indeterminate sentences: 1991–2023
The number of women in prison with no release date has more than trebled in the last 30 years



Sources:
Table A1.1, Ministry of Justice (2023). Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2023.
Table 5.1, Home Office (2003). Prison statistics England and Wales 2001. Cm 5473.
Note: The number of recalled women on indeterminate sentences was not reliably recorded before 2016.

As of September 2023, there were a total of 34 women in custody serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. This includes nine women who have never been released and a further 25 women who had been recalled.⁴

When faced with spending many years in prison, women face distinct difficulties around mental and physical health, contact with family and children, and concerns around fertility. Women account for disproportionately high rates of self-harm and suicide within prisons. Self-harm rates across the women's estate are at the highest level on record. There was a 63% increase in the rate of self-harm in the women's estate in the last year, compared to a 3% increase in the male estate.⁵ The uncertainty of indeterminate sentences in particular is known to contribute to high levels of distress.⁶

Women in prison often have extensive histories of trauma, substance misuse issues and mental health difficulties, and for a large number serving long sentences, the offence was committed within the context of coercive or abusive relationships. As a result, before entering custody, many women are already living with the long-term impact of trauma. Prison can exacerbate some of these vulnerabilities. The punitive nature of prison dynamics and noisy and chaotic prison spaces can be reminiscent of traumatic family circumstances for some women.⁷ As research with long serving women has shown, power dynamics with staff can be challenging, particularly when professional boundaries are not properly maintained.⁸ All of these aspects are likely to impact how a woman is able to progress through a long sentence.

Progression

Progression in prison is governed by the overarching policy framework "Manage the Custodial Sentence".⁹ This includes the 'Offender Management in Custody' (OMiC) model, which was introduced in the women's estate in 2020, two years after introduction in the male estate. The policy framework states that the OMiC model 'places prisoners and the development of rehabilitation cultures in prisons at the heart of the offending management processes'.¹⁰ The model bases progression on iterative assessments of the risk of reconviction and the risk of serious harm. These risk assessments are carried out by a variety of HMPPS staff, but the methods used to do so are originally founded on research carried out by forensic psychologists.¹¹ Risk assessments form the basis of a sentence plan, which the prisoner is then expected to work on throughout their time in custody. Sentence plans are unique to each individual and should be updated regularly to reflect their progression through the sentence. In reality, the processes involved in sentence progression can feel arbitrary for those subject to them, and many of the interventions and opportunities available for them will vary individually and in different prisons. The concept of 'risk' is also not clearly defined, and often different types of risk are conflated. For instance, whether someone is compliant in custody is a distinct issue from their risk of being reconvicted, but often these areas are viewed as interlinked. Therefore, the language of 'risk' and 'risk reduction' can be imprecise.

Another important part of the OMiC model is the keyworker scheme, which provides prisoners with a staff member who is the first point of contact to support them with their rehabilitation and progression. Keyworkers are expected to be available one-to-one with a prisoner for 45 minutes a week. In reality, the operation of the OMiC model and the keywork scheme varies across prison sites. Initially the Covid-19 pandemic, and now continued staff shortages, have caused disruption to the regularity and quality of keywork meetings.¹² The women we consulted with unsurprisingly reported mixed experiences of the keyworker scheme. Some had positive experiences, which were largely contingent on consistency and a good relationship with keyworkers. Others reported rarely seeing their keyworker, or their keyworker changing too regularly for them to establish a useful relationship.

The risks posed by women in custody are distinct from that of their male counterparts, but many of the policies governing sentence progression in women's prisons have been designed for male prisoners.¹³ This lack of gender sensitivity means that aspects of long-term imprisonment which disproportionately impact the women's estate are not properly recognised or understood. For instance, many women

-serving long, indeterminate sentences will be required to spend time in a Therapeutic Community (TC) in order to meet their sentence plan objectives. As the only TC in the women's estate is at HMP Send in Surrey, many women will have to relocate many miles from home.¹⁴ This can have a negative impact not only on contact with loved ones and children in the community, but also could negatively impact on progress a woman has made within her current prison. For example, the move could affect friendships built in the prison and employment gained. So, though a move can be seen as helping to progress in terms of meeting requirements on a sentence plan, it could be detrimental to progression on a personal level.

Sentence length

It's mental game.

(Amira)

For many of the women involved in this work, particularly those earlier in their sentence, the sheer length of their sentence means hope for progression and release seems abstract. For those who have spent years in the system, often having made little progress, the sentence felt heavy and overly punitive:

It stops being about rehabilitation and just becomes incapacitation.

(Emily)

For long termers, you have the bit at the beginning, the bit at the end, and the great depression in between.

(Amira)

The process of progression was a source of frustration for many. In previous consultations in the male estate, the men often used the term 'moving the goalposts' in relation to their sentence plan. This referred to the perception that new sentence plan objectives merely revisited the content of earlier interventions. In other cases this meant new assessments of the prisoner had caused new sentence plan objectives to be identified well into the sentence.¹⁵ The term and sentiment was also used by women we consulted with.

They can change the goalposts, but we can't. During covid I didn't see my probation officer for six months, because it suited them. If I didn't turn up to those meetings I'd be recalled.

(Nicola)

It's like playing football with someone who keeps moving the goalposts.

(Amber)

One woman compared her experience of being a lifer with being a victim of abuse. She reflected:

The prison service is like legal domestic abuse; they control everything we do and we can't say no. If we don't do as they say, we'll never get out.

(Amber)

For some, the challenges they faced with progression made it hard for them to see a way out of prison, and they thought a lot about the prospect of dying in prison:

I know I'm going to die in here. The only way I'm leaving is in a coffin.

(Mary)

They took away executions just to mentally fuck us up instead. I would have preferred to be executed.

(Amber)

Programmes

The women involved in this work recognise that in order to lower their risk, engagement in Offending Behaviour Programmes (OBPs) is essential. OBPs aim to work with prisoners and change their attitudes, thinking and behaviour.¹⁶ Several of the women noted they feel long-termers are not prioritised for interventions or programmes that may help them to progress, and shorter-sentenced women take precedence. In practice, individuals are put forward for interventions on the basis of a series of prioritisation principles, relating to details surrounding their risk, progression and relevant dates in their sentence (including their tariff expiry date and parole eligibility date). This means in some prisons where demand is high for a particular intervention, people serving longer sentences are likely to wait many years to be a priority. Furthermore, the policy is not always interpreted or communicated accurately to prisoners, meaning many feel disadvantaged.

Access to appropriate programmes can be difficult. Not all prisons run all relevant OBPs, so women have to relocate many miles from home to spend a portion of their sentence in a prison that runs a certain intervention. This is particularly difficult, as women are already likely to be held in a prison far away from home - on average 63 miles - but many are considerably further away.¹⁷ This can cause issues in maintaining family contact, which can feel like an additional layer of punishment for some. In addition, some women raised concerns as to whether completing a programme (that is often short-term and not individualistic), could have genuine benefits to them:

Completing a programme doesn't mean my risk suddenly disappears.
(Freya)

A bad programme would be one that is too formal and generic, they just don't get to the root of the issues. They should be based on the individual rather than some generic or theoretical ideas.
(Mary)

It's not like we're computers and you can just put a programme in and it is fixed.
(Amber)

It is important to get to the root of why someone committed a crime, but when you come in and get assessed, it feels like you're just there to tick boxes. It's basically saying "you've done this course, you're cleared now", rather than actually dealing with the issue.
(Paige)

In relation to the content of the programmes, some of the women felt it tended to be patronising, dehumanising and sometimes trauma-inducing:

Every session feels like opening a box that I've kept closed for years. I have to keep opening the box and reliving the bad stuff.
(Patricia)

Some of the content of the courses is insulting – I do have a brain you know.
(Amber)

For group interventions, a large number of women felt vulnerable discussing their histories and issues with other women present. For some, this gave way to bullying and taunting from peers, which increased the likelihood of women disengaging:

Group therapy is the root of all evil. It makes people more vulnerable.
(Mary)

There is a lot of bullying that goes on.
(Emily)

Judgment from other prisoners is not monitored closely enough.

(Patricia)

One-to-one interventions feel so much safer.

(Paige)

However, some women were more positive about their experiences of interventions. In these cases, it seems the women were engaging in interventions at the right time – when they felt settled in the sentence and ready to address certain difficulties.

Programmes have helped me; I don't argue with people the same way anymore. If I have an issue with someone, I go away and reflect on it and think about what I could do differently. I see things as a learning process now.

(Mary)

I chose to do that course because I needed to understand my addiction. It really helped me to understand myself.

(Paige)

Women also referred to supportive and honest relationships with intervention staff, which seemed to make the difference in them feeling safe and comfortable in these settings. In one case, a woman referred to her relationship with an intervention facilitator as one of the turning points in her sentence. This member of staff was honest and supportive, whilst offering constructive advice in times of need. The woman noted this relationship was different to those with other prison staff because in this instance the member of staff had actively tried to get to know her – to understand her experiences and learn her triggers. This meant the woman felt safe, listened to, and able to discuss her emotional experiences in a judgment-free space. That being said, further along in her sentence, this woman's relationship with the staff member was raised as a concern by the Parole Board as an indication that she was too reliant on their support, which felt contradictory to her and caused a lot of distress. This case is one example of when the Parole Board's interpretation of 'risk' seems at odds with the women's own experiences. This contradiction between engaging in the risk reduction work and then this being flagged as a concerning or negative relationship highlights the difficult balance whereby only the right level of compliance – which is highly subjective – is regarded as appropriate.

Many of the women felt the system placed too much emphasis on programmes, to the detriment of other, often more personal forms of self-improvement. They felt that these other forms of self-improvement were unlikely to be recognised in the context of a reduction in risk. For example, one woman noted that stopping self-harming was a significant step in her journey, which was not something that would be formally acknowledged at parole:

I have made a lot of progression by not self-harming and working on myself...[I have] come a long way, yes I have faced a few barriers but now can face things without barriers.

(Sarah)

These forms of self-improvement and personal development fall outside of the formal risk reduction processes of the prison system, meaning that these positive moments can sometimes be missed from official records. This is a source of frustration for the women and demonstrates a lack of individualised approaches to progression.

Contact with the Offender Management Unit (OMU)

On our visits to prisons across the estate, we often hear that staffing issues impact how accessible the OMU is for people serving long sentences. The whole prison system has been impacted by staffing issues both in recruitment and retention. The number of frontline operational prison staff was cut by 26% between 2010 and 2017¹⁸ and nearly half (47%) of officers who left the service last year had been in the role for less than three years.¹⁹ There have also been staff shortages in other departments, such as OMU. The women involved in this work identified these concerns, stressing the negative impact this can have on their ability to progress through the sentence:

We've been told that OMU are so short-staffed that they're just forgetting about OMiC

(Amber)

I've been here for seven years and OMU have always been short staffed.

(Mary)

The women were aware that delays caused by staffing issues in OMU could have a very real impact on how quickly they progress:

OMU basically don't exist here, we just keep being told "we're understaffed", that's all well and good but this is our lives.

(Amber)

There is no information on progression. You try to do OMU workbooks for progression and your case worker don't turn up. Until it's parole time you're literally invisible.

(Naomi)

Staff turnover, particularly in OMU, meant meeting new caseworkers was common. The women found this stressful, particularly when it meant retelling histories of abuse and explaining the circumstances and details of the offence:

I've been here since 2017 and I've now had 11 caseworkers. I don't even like meeting them now because I know they won't be here the next time I see them. It's retraumatising meeting with new caseworkers. Every time I have to relive what happened and it triggers me.

(Alice)

Issues with OMU meant some of the women did not have up-to-date or detailed sentence plans, which made it difficult for them to know how to help themselves. This echoed our findings from previous consultations in the male estate, that sentence plans based only on objectives to reduce (non-specified) risks do not offer adequate guidance.²⁰ In the women's estate, some also found the sentence plan to be basic and lacking any real substance in relation to how to reduce risk:

The only thing on my sentence plan is to remain adjudication free – what does that leave me to work towards?

(Amira)

In relation to the processes involved in sentence management, the women expressed concern about sentence plans being created without them being consulted. Many prisoners do not know they are able to participate in sentencing planning. The "Manage the custodial sentence" policy framework states that "all prisoners who are in scope of OASys must be provided the opportunity to participate in their sentence planning".²¹ But the women reported a difference between policy and practice. For some of the women who were unable to participate, it felt like a process that happened to them, rather than with them:

The sentence plan is meant to be a tool that is discussed with me. There is no consultation or collaboration. It isn't a dialogue at all.

(Sonya)

Parole

For those serving indeterminate sentences, their release can only be ordered on the basis of a risk assessment by the Parole Board. In broad terms, the legal test for release is that the Parole Board must be satisfied that 'it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public that the prisoner be kept in custody'.²² Once released, life sentenced prisoners are subject to probation supervision for the rest of their life, and they can be recalled to prison at any point if they are deemed to have broken licence conditions or are reported to have committed further offences (this can be based on reported behaviour without charge or whilst a police investigation is still ongoing). Parole Board reviews can either be aimed at directing release from prison, or directing transfer to lower security conditions, such as an open prison.

The last few years have been characterised by extensive policy changes (and reversals), which has impacted the lives of many people serving long prison sentences.

- In March 2022, the government announced the conclusions of a root and branch review of the parole system in England and Wales.²³ This review stated the intention to introduce legislation to allow the Secretary of State to review and reverse decisions made by the Parole Board in the cases of some 'top tier' prisoners on the basis of ensuring 'public confidence' in the criminal justice system.
- In June 2022, the government announced 'much stricter criteria to move from closed to open prison' for indeterminate sentenced prisoners.²⁴ Criteria was later published but there continued to be limited policy or operational guidance.²⁵
- In June 2022, the government introduced a statutory instrument to amend Parole Board rules. This included the introduction of a 'single view' procedure whereby prison and probation officers, forensic psychologists and anyone else commissioned by HMPPS to give evidence at parole hearings on the release of parole-eligible prisoners were forbidden from giving a view on whether or not to release a prisoner.²⁶

As a result of these changes, in the first quarter of 2023, just 16% of Parole Board recommendations were accepted, in comparison to 91% of recommendations being accepted the year before.²⁷ Conversations with working groups during this time often veered towards this topic, with many of the women who were nearing Parole Board decisions feeling increasingly anxious. There was also confusion as to what measures had changed, when these had changed, and what this meant for those serving relevant sentences.

Since the introduction of these changes, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) and others raised concerns about the huge impact these changes were having on the lives of people in prison. After months of campaigning, in July 2023 the new Secretary of State, Alex Chalk, withdrew some of the controversial changes relating to the criteria for transferring indeterminate prisoners from closed to open prison conditions.²⁸ Crucially, the changes removed the ambiguous requirement that a move to open conditions should be 'considered essential', and the requirement that a move should not undermine 'public confidence' in the criminal justice system.²⁹ PRT and other organisations continue to campaign on this issue through the Victims and Prisoners Bill currently passing through parliament.

Whilst the changes are welcomed, those women who had gone in front of the Parole Board during that time continue to be impacted, either from having their release blocked, or by the backlog of cases through the system.

The worry of parole occupied much of the time for women later on in their sentence, even when they weren't affected by the changes. Some gave examples of women nearing parole with little support or recognition for just how monumental this process was for them. They recognised that this lack of support meant women were often ill-equipped and unprepared for Parole Board hearings:

They leave girls behind the door with no support for parole.
(Mary)

Not everyone can be proactive, some of the girls can't read and write – how are they supposed to know how to help themselves? Often when they don't know what something means they feel too embarrassed to ask.

(Rebecca)

Some women also expressed concern relating to the power some staff have to influence significant decisions relating to progression and parole. Relationships with staff in psychology and OMU can often be distant, but assessments from these departments can hold significant weight in decisions about progression. In some cases, the staff who contributed to parole dossiers had only met the women briefly, which made the women question if these contributions could be an accurate depiction of their circumstances. The women gave examples of comments from prison psychologists appearing in their parole dossier after only meeting them once or twice. They believed that those who know them best – for instance wing staff, who they interact with daily – would often be better placed to provide comments for parole dossiers. Often, opportunities to challenge the content of reports were not clear and many felt that the power placed on written reports was worrying:

Sometimes the information on parole dossiers is just wrong. There is no way for us to challenge it.'

(Emily)

The dossier always just focuses on the negatives, they never talk about positives. If they did it was only because I insisted, but not everyone is articulate or good at speaking.

(Rebecca)

Restricted Status

A number of the women involved in this work were subject to additional security measures as a result of being Restricted Status (RS). Restricted Status is defined as:

A Restricted Status prisoner is any female, young person or young adult prisoner, convicted or on remand whose escape would present a serious risk to the public and who is required to be held in designated secure accommodation. Separate procedural security arrangements apply to Restricted Status prisoners.³⁰

The number of RS prisoners held in the women's estate has fluctuated in the last decade, but overall the numbers have almost doubled, from 11 in 2013 to 21 in 2023.³¹ A recent thematic review by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) raised concerns relating to the processes involved in the RS system for women and children, especially in relation to weaknesses in risk assessments and a lack of acknowledgement of different resource levels across the prison estate.³² Those we spoke to referred to the system as dehumanising – the RS label became a source of stigma that stuck with them through the duration of the sentence:

People who don't know you think "oh she's dangerous".

(Lily)

This can also lead to tension with other prisoners, when details of their index offence – whether true or not – “fly around the unit and get totally twisted” (Lily).

Some of the women we spoke to struggled with this stigma. At one prison, the women who were RS had to carry a different colour ID card to all other prisoners. They felt this immediately ‘othered’ them, and when they were around the general population prisoners, they felt judged because of it.

Women who are RS are only able to be held in three prisons (HMPs Bronzefield, Low Newton and New Hall) due to the security measures their management requires. For many of these women, the interventions and services they need to access in order to reduce their risk are only available at other prison sites.

As such, they can be stuck, unable to progress until they reduce their risk, but also unable to prove a reduction in risk due to not being able to access OBPs in other prisons. One woman told us “It’s a catch 22”. This feeling of being stagnant was noted by several of the RS prisoners we spoke to:

They tell me I’ve done all the risk reduction work, but I just need to serve longer. I’m just sat here waiting...It’s been 16 months since my last RS review – I’ve done everything on my sentence plan and I’m still stuck.

(Amira)

In our discussions with practitioners, concerns were raised about who is responsible for the management of RS prisoners. Oversight is from the Long-Term and High Security Prisons Group Director. This role also has oversight of RS removal. The mechanism to make this decision is through a category A review board, which also manages category A adult male prisoners.³³ This board does not include membership from leaders in the women’s estate. This was recently raised as a concern by HMIP, who highlighted the need for more specialist knowledge and expertise relating to the risks and needs of women, which would allow a more tailored process.³⁴

The processes of risk assessment and management are applied in line with that of the male estate, meaning there is a lack of recognition of the distinct needs of women. There is also a lack of awareness of the specific processes of risk reduction available to women in prison, particularly in relation to what interventions are available across the estate. This issue was raised by HMIP, and we have heard similar concerns relating to a lack of gender-sensitive approaches.

These observations resonate with my own experience as the former Director of Women in HMPPS. The criteria for evidencing risk reduction and therefore progression was fundamentally geared towards category A men. Women who found themselves categorised as RS, found it harder to progress than their male counterparts. The absence of a ‘rule book’ that was women-centric kept women and the professionals who worked with them stuck in the system. The RS review system needs to untangle itself from the male estate, and a new process set up for RS women that looks at the bespoke risk needs of women and places these at the heart of decision making.

(Pia Sinha, PRT CEO)

The RS women we spoke to were also aware of the potential problems posed by this practice, and expressed concern about being subject to review from a team that works mainly with male prisoners:

There should be a category A women’s team, because we are managed by the male estate.

(Charlie)

One of the women reflected on good practice at one establishment, where she had regular contact with a member of staff from the security team. She found this helpful as this member of staff was familiar with the rules and regulations surrounding the RS process, which meant she felt supported. This contact meant she did not have to discuss her circumstances with landing staff who were less familiar with RS policies, which could at times be frustrating:

I felt safe...that’s a big deal for me.

(Clare)

Post release

The challenges of being a long-sentenced prisoner do not end on release from prison. Often, transition back into the community can be a challenging and stressful experience, particularly for women leaving custody, who grapple with concerns related to housing, employment, and maintaining contact with their families. Specialised support for these individuals is sometimes inadequate.³⁵ One significant area where support is inconsistent is in securing accommodation, with statistics revealing that only half (49.7%) of women released from prison in the year to March 2023 left with stable accommodation.³⁶ For those

-serving life sentences, they will typically be released to an Approved Premise (AP), but even if they secure this accommodation, the provision is only for 84 nights.

The 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act introduced a 'duty to refer' where prisons are required to notify local authorities of anyone at risk of homelessness on release in good time for the local authority to meet its housing duties, but practice has been inconsistent. Concerns surrounding accommodation are particularly acute for those serving long sentences, for fear of recall to custody.

Staffing shortages in the probation service has contributed to a lack of communication and support for the women. This, compounded by the lack of provision for other support services, means many women feel abandoned.³⁷ Contact with probation often feels focused on risk, to the detriment of meeting any additional needs the woman may have. The power of probation to recall women to custody also means some feel hesitant to go to probation for help in times of need, for fear they will be seen to be not coping.³⁸

We spoke to Rebecca about some of her experiences:

A case study

Rebecca was released after spending 12 years of a life sentence in prison. She was released without accommodation, so had to rely on family members for housing and support. When she was still in custody, she attempted to be proactive to find somewhere to live, but this proved difficult:

I asked for day release to help sort me accommodation, but it was refused by the governor. I was told the prison could organise a hostel place for me, but they told me that would make my risk go up.

As someone on life licence, Rebecca was very conscious of how to ensure a steady transition into the community, to prevent any further issues. She knew a place in a hostel was not the best option for her. She also found that being supported by family members meant she was not eligible for other support:

I ended up living with a family member and in the end, he had to throw me out so the council would house me. I had to be registered homeless for anyone to help.

As Rebecca had been in prison for over a decade, the prospect of re-entering the community was daunting, and she often felt probation were not supporting her in the best possible way.

You're away from the community for so long and then the community changes. It's easy to lose sight of the outside world. It's easy to lose hope.

Now, having been living in the community for a number of years, Rebecca's contact with probation is limited:

For me, I just have phone calls from probation once a month. They've told me they're only dealing with critical cases.

She finds that probation is preoccupied with measuring and monitoring risk, and they often lose sight of how to help.

As a lifer, you're just constantly under stress and pressure. Probation just think about risk rather than offering any support. I've had no help from probation. It was all through the council and my family.

Rebecca reflected on the impact of serving a long sentence and noted that lifers being released are often left with little support. While Rebecca was able to be supported by family members, she noted that many women have very limited support networks. For these women, support from the system is even more important. For Rebecca, the trauma of serving a long prison sentence is hard to recover from:

I don't think you're ever the same after a sentence like that.

Conclusion

Those who have contributed to this work spoke of the unique difficulties women face when trying to progress through a long sentence. A lack of a gender-sensitive approach means many women are viewed through the same risk lens as their male counterparts, despite huge differences in their circumstances and experiences. Often, women feel that staff do not know how to support those serving long sentences in the best possible way, leading to an absence of meaningful practical and emotional support. Differing practices across the estate meant some women fared better than others, particularly in relation to contact with OMU and keyworkers. For those whose contact with OMU was limited, they felt at a loss in how to help themselves. Overly simplistic sentence plans meant that some women did not know what was expected of them, and meant they spent substantial periods of the sentence with nothing productive to do with their time.

In relation to those under RS, the processes were unclear, frustrating and dehumanising. This group feels like a forgotten entity – an afterthought to the management of category A men. The number of women assessed as requiring management under RS is incredibly low, and yet those we spoke to feel that a person-specific approach is still largely absent. A lack of gender-specific knowledge and understanding relating to the risks posed by women means there is an incomplete picture in much of the management of RS prisoners, and the expertise of the women's directorate should form a more central role in informing this process.

As noted by the experiences of Rebecca, the pre-release support offered to women who have served long sentences can be problematic. As many of these individuals will be subject to life licence conditions when released, a lack of proactive and communicative probation support – both before and after release – can be a source of concern and distress.

Recommendations

1. As part of the current review of the women's policy framework, HMPPS should consult on and then amend the policy framework to make specific reference to long-term prisoners.
2. In the new 'One HMPPS' model, as part of their portfolio, regional prison and probation leaders should take an active role in ensuring a woman-specific approach to progression for women serving long sentences.
3. The national OMiC lead should review the OMiC policy governing the women's estate to ensure the management of women serving long sentences is fit for purpose and reflects the needs of women.
4. In line with the Manage the Custodial Sentence policy framework, HMPPS must involve prisoners, and where appropriate, their families and loved ones, in creating, amending, and updating sentence plans. Sentence plans should be reviewed at least annually, or more frequently if other information has come to light.
5. HMPPS should take urgent action to develop a range of women specific Offender Behaviour Programmes (OBPs) to support women to progress through their sentences.
6. HMPPS should develop a women centred approach to reviewing Restricted Status cases in the women's estate. They should achieve this by:
 - a. ensuring leaders from the women's estate are always part of the category A review panel; and
 - b. tailoring each panel to reflect the woman's bespoke needs.
7. All prisons holding long-sentenced women should have a fully trained long-term prisoner lead, who is a senior point of contact who ensures staff teams are equipped with accurate and up to date information relating to risk, risk reduction and sentence progression.
8. Prisons should create meaningful opportunities for prisoner leadership by assigning and training prisoners to be sentence progression representatives.
9. All women's prisons should introduce localised policies to improve through-the-gate support for women serving long sentences, including relating to accommodation, employment or training, contact with family, and mental health support.

Endnotes

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The number of women serving an indeterminate sentence has grown from 96 in 1991, to 381 in September 2023.

Reform campaigns typically aim to divert women away from custody and towards community responses which better address women's multiple and complex needs, including around childcare, mental health, housing and employment. These campaigns are vital in the larger picture of women's imprisonment. However, the lack of visibility of women serving long prison sentences in policy and advocacy debates means their experiences are not fully recognised.

This briefing is informed by working group discussions, letters and emails from women serving long sentences. The women spoke about what progression means for them, and the barriers they face in progressing through their sentence. This briefing makes recommendations to address the concerns.