THE GENDERED PAINS OF LIFE IMPRISONMENT

BEN CREWE*, SUSIE HULLEY and SERENA WRIGHT

As many scholars have noted, women remain peripheral in most analyses of the practices and effects of imprisonment. This article aims to redress this pattern by comparing the problems of long-term confinement as experienced by male and female prisoners, and then detailing the most significant and distinctive problems reported by the latter. It begins by reporting data that illustrate that the women report an acutely more painful experience than their male counterparts. It then focuses on the issues that were of particular salience to the women: loss of contact with family members; power, autonomy and control; psychological well-being and mental health; and matters of trust, privacy and intimacy. The article concludes that understanding how women experience long sentences is not possible without grasping the multiplicity of abuse that the great majority have experienced in the community, or without recognizing their emotional commitments and biographies.

Key words: women prisoners, life sentences, pre-incarceration trauma

The Gendered Pains of Imprisonment

In her chapter 'Why study women's imprisonment? Or anyone else's?', Pat Carlen (1994) questioned both the separation of research on men's and women's imprisonment, and the tendency for research on female prisoners to theorize their object of study without due reference to the prison's punitive function. Specifically, Carlen's concerns included the 'adding in' of variables such as race and class, in ways that threatened to foreclose the production of theory, the romanticization of the prison 'as a prime site for the engendering of human resistance in the face of oppression' (p. 134), and the analysis of imprisonment as an extension of, or metaphor for, forms of regulation beyond the prison itself. In such ways, Carlen argued, the study of imprisonment *as punishment* and the prison as 'a state mechanism for legitimated pain delivery' (p. 136) had been peripheralized.

Writing 15 years later, in a piece titled 'Women in prison prefer legitimacy to sex', Alison Liebling (2009) presented a similar critique. Noting the output of research since the early 1990s on issues such as legitimacy and fairness in prisons in the United Kingdom, Liebling pointed out that little of this work had been undertaken with female prisoners. Rather, much of the research on women in prison was focussed on 'the private, the domestic and the sexual' (p. 20)—i.e. same-sex relationships, pseudo-family structures and other issues in which gender and femininity were foregrounded. Liebling's point was not that this work had no value, but that themes of order, trust and power, which were 'arguably of primary importance in the lives of women, are more prominent in the research literature on men in prison' (p. 22).

Both scholars reflected on the potential benefits of studying male and female prisoners together. Carlen suggested a '"federal" approach, wherein "women's prison" studies

*Ben Crewe, Deputy Director, Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK; bc247@cam.ac.uk; Susie Hulley, Research Associate, Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; Serena Wright, Research Associate, Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.

might inform and be informed by studies of "men's prisons"' (p. 134), as a means of promoting 'a more focused analysis of prison penality' (p. 138), while Liebling advocated an approach which would explore key penological matters such as authority, justice and trust without making gendered presumptions 'about what is relevant to women' (p. 22) or being 'blindly dominated by assumptions about what is relevant to men' (p. 22).

This article seeks to meet this brief by using gender as a key sensitizing concept in a comparative analysis of the experiences of male and female prisoners serving very long life sentences from an early age.[1] Its focus is not on state punishment *per se*, but on the pains and problems of imprisonment, i.e. the most direct outcome of the prison's punitive function and a central issue in the sociology of imprisonment because of the dynamics of penal power and authority. In our analysis, gender is both centred and de-centred: de-centred in that the conceptual focus is gender-neutral; centred in that the analytic framework and interpretive lens are formed around a consideration of differences in the findings between the male and female sample. Meanwhile, since so much less is known about life imprisonment for women than for men, our emphasis throughout the article is more on the former than the latter. We begin, therefore, by presenting comparative data on the problems experienced by our male and female participants, and then focus in more detail on the issues that were of particular salience to the women. These issues related broadly to: the loss of contact with family members; power, autonomy and control; psychological well-being and mental health; and matters of trust, privacy and intimacy.

Women serving 'life'

Historically, studies of indeterminate imprisonment have rendered women serving life sentences 'an invisible entity' (Zehr 1996, cited in Leigey and Reed 2014: 316). Those studies that were central to the sociology of life imprisonment in an earlier period (e.g. Cohen and Taylor 1972; Richards 1978; Flanagan 1981; Sapsford 1983) are, in this respect, limited, because they focus only on male prisoners, and pay little attention to issues of gender. Indeed, explicit academic interest in women's experiences of serving life in England and Wales is limited to two key texts. The first is Genders and Player's (1990) study of the initial assessment period of a life sentence, undertaken in HMP Durham, England, the location of the Main Centre for female lifers at that time. Genders and Player focus their analysis on the 'deprivations' of the loss of liberty, possessions, autonomy, privacy and heterosexual relations, as experienced by women serving such sentences. The second is Walker and Worrall's (2000) consideration of the 'gendered pains of indeterminate imprisonment', involving interviews with 47 female life sentenced prisoners across four English prisons. The findings of this study highlighted the impact of 'time' and 'the reconstruction of "womanhood" under conditions of intensive and prolonged surveillance' as central in making sense of how *gender* shaped the penal experience of the life sentence (Walker and Worrall 2000: 27). Walker and Worrall concluded that women serving life sentences 'suffer in special ways from the "pains of indeterminacy"' (p. 28); specifically, the loss of control over fertility and the loss of relationships with children.

[1]Throughout this article, 'gender' refers to the division between the *cis women and *cis men within our sample. None of our interviewees self-identified as gender non-binary.

Beyond the United Kingdom, Jose-Kampfner (1990: 110) identified broad similarities between women's narratives of coming to terms with a life sentence and the 'stages of grief', noting that the 'existential death' experienced through a long sentence was not dissimilar to learning to live with a terminal illness. Other key studies relating explicitly to women's experiences of life imprisonment in the United States have focused on the issue of 'coping', with Dye and Aday (2013: 832) highlighting the myriad ways in which women's 'adjustments to prison are often marked by thoughts of suicide', while Aday *et al.* (2014: 238) describe the importance for female 'lifers' of religion/spirituality in 'maintaining hope'. Most recently, Lempert (2016: xi) has highlighted the 'soul-crushing' impact of life imprisonment on women in US prisons.

To this extent, our academic understanding of how women experience long life sentences in England and Wales remains in the 'partial and obscure' (1990: 46) state in which Genders and Player found it 25 years ago. This is in spite of the 'dramatic increase' (cf. *Hansard*, 28 April 1982, col 870) in the long-term—and particularly indeterminate—population of prisons in England and Wales, coupled with the 'boom' in women's imprisonment more generally (cf. Chesney-Lind 2002: 80), meaning that more women are serving longer sentences than ever before. And while earlier studies outlined some of the key deprivations of life imprisonment for women, the connections between these deprivations, the pains that they engender and the biographical experiences of the women who bear them remain highly underdeveloped. It is relevant to such concerns, then, that Genders and Player identified the women in their study as feeling 'personally devalued as women'. Interviewees noted that this was partially a result of their penal experience, but that primarily this feeling emanated from 'events prior to imprisonment' (1990: 54).

In the absence of further comment, the wider literature on women's imprisonment allows us to make inferences as to what such events might consist of. Dye and Aday (2013) point to women's histories of sexual abuse and violent victimization as shaping the experience of the life sentence, while Leigey and Reed's (2014) analysis of 'traumatic and negative life events' among female life-sentenced prisoners (hereafter LSPs) highlighted such factors as: being in foster care; parental substance use; homelessness; and both sexual and physical abuse of various forms. Female LSPs were 'significantly more likely' than their male LSP counterparts to report having experienced these events. In many instances, differences were stark: more than half of female LSPs reported parental substance abuse in childhood, compared to 35 per cent of male LSPs. Over a third (35 per cent) of female LSPs (and 29 per cent of female non-LSPs) reported having attempted to take their own life prior to imprisonment, compared to 13.5 per cent of male LSPs. Almost 60 per cent of female LSPs reported lifetime prevalence of sexual abuse (compared to 29 per cent among female non-LSPs, and 8 per cent among the men). Put simply, female LSPs were 'significantly more likely than either reference group to have been sexual abused' (Leigey and Reed 2014: 311).

The wider research on violence and abuse give some indication of their likely effects. Violent events—particularly early childhood sexual and physical abuse—'rip at the core of an individual's developing sense of self' (Stenius and Veysey 2005: 1155). They 'breach attachments of family, friendship, love, and community' (Herman 1992, cited in Etherington 2008: 173) and, through the betrayal of trust, erode the sense that the world is 'safe, just and orderly' (Stenius and Veysey 2005: 1155). Experiences of sexual and physical victimization in particular result in 'long-term cognitive, emotional and

interpersonal consequences' (Fallot and Harris 2002: 476), which play out across the adult life course in the form of problems with emotional control, emotional dissociation, depression, substance abuse and 'difficulties maintaining safe, stable, and mutually satisfying interpersonal relations'. How such traumas shape women's experiences of life imprisonment, and, in particular, how they interact with the problems and deprivations of prison life, remains unclear. As Liebling (2009: 23) notes, '[g]iven the high levels of past abuse in women's experience, their experiences of trust, relationships and authority in prison should be of major interest to researchers and policy-makers alike'.[2] We return to these issues, among others, in the analysis ahead.

The study

This article discusses findings from a study of men and women serving very long life sentences (a minimum/'tariff' period of 15 years or more) in the England and Wales prison system, sentenced when aged 25 or younger. At the onset of fieldwork, in February 2013, the relevant population comprised 789 men and 29 women. In total, 310 men (39 per cent of the male population who met the research criteria) and 23 women (79 per cent of the female population who met the research criteria) participated in the study either by engaging in an in-depth interview, completing a survey, or both.[3] All participants had been convicted of murder and were serving mandatory life sentences. Across 25 prisons (16 holding men and nine holding women), surveys were administered to 294 men and 19 women, while in-depth interviews were conducted with 125 men and 21 women. Participants were selected to represent the distribution of the population across the prison system. In the men's estate, the prisons ranged from high-security establishments, through Categories B, C and D prisons (high/medium-security, medium-security and open prisons, respectively), and Young Offender Institutions. The women's estate in England and Wales includes only two types of prisons—open and closed—and our research took us only to the latter.

  As we discuss in greater detail elsewhere (see Hulley *et al.* 2016), the main body of our survey comprised the problem statements used by Barry Richards in his 1978 study of the experience of long-term imprisonment, supplemented with 21 additional problem statements which we developed during the early phase of our fieldwork. Prisoners were asked to specify how often they experienced each problem and how easy or difficult they found it to deal with each problem. A 'severity' score was calculated for each problem by multiplying the scores for these two measures ('frequency' and 'solubility'). Our interviews were conducted in two parts. The first part was a detailed life history interview, which asked about family background, life aspirations and experiences of education, state authority and the criminal justice system. We did not ask directly about interviewees' index offences, but nor did we discourage interviewees from discussing these events. The second part of each interview focussed on prison life, in particular, the problems of serving such sentences, means of managing the sentence, issues of identity, change and the future, social and relational life within and beyond the prison

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[2]This fits into a broader absence of 'trauma-informed' research and care for women (cf. Stenius and Veysey 2005), which is 'particularly important' within the context of women's 'rehabilitation' within the criminal justice system (Covington 2007: 154).
  [3]For further information relating to the design, implementation and results of the survey, see Hulley *et al.* (2016). For further information on the interview schedules and data, see Wright *et al.* (2016).

(e.g. relationships with prisoners and staff, and with friends and family outside the prison) and matters of legitimacy and compliance. All interviews were transcribed and coded in full, using an iterative analytic approach.

Here, some candour about the research design is required. Based on the populations of male and female prisoners who met our criteria at the outset of the study, and given our initial sampling strategy, our sample of the latter would have been only four. Recognizing that this number would make generalizations about women's experience of long-term imprisonment unfeasible, we initially decided to interview only men. However, aware of the importance of seeking the women's experiences, and keen to undertake comparative analysis, we obtained further funding that enabled us to invite all of the women within the population to participate in the study. While, in the light of the literature on women's imprisonment, we adapted in minor ways the interview schedule that we had used with our male participants, we made no such amendments to our survey, in order to ensure comparability of data. Since the survey had initially been designed for use with male prisoners, we recognize that there is some risk that this tool omitted issues that we might have included had we instead interviewed the women before the men. Our feeling, though, is that only a small number of additional problems—e.g. what Lempert (2016: 153) summarizes as the 'institutional violation of bodily integrity'—might have featured had we done so. Most of these problems are related to the issues that we set out in our qualitative findings below.

For the purpose of this article, the analysis involved an iterative process, in which we moved between the survey and interview data, seeking to make sense of each in relation to the other. Each interview transcript was closely read by one or more team member and was coded into thematic categories comprising one or more of the 'problems' that featured in the survey. Particular attention was paid to the relationship between biographical detail and discussions of the prison experience. In combining the survey and interview data, our approach was similar to that advocated by Holmström (1976/2007), who sought to combine the most useful outcomes of life history material (its richness of detail, and the opportunity to biographically document 'the world as it looks from a certain point of view') (Holmström 1976/2007: 87) and survey data without fragmenting or distorting individual accounts.

Most relevant to this style of analysis were the distinctive pre-prison experiences of almost all the women. While the stories of the men whom we interviewed were often distressing, the intensity and consistency of the trauma disclosed by the women was qualitatively different. Almost without exception, the women's life stories read as catalogues of suffering and abuse, including physical and sexual violence, intimate bereavement and drug and alcohol addiction. While these are reported in almost all studies of female prisoners (see, e.g., Owen 1998; Lempert 2016), they are sometimes described in terms whose abstractions fail to convey the full meaning of these experiences. Here, we provide two (edited) excerpts, in order to communicate the kinds of experiences that our participants had suffered, and because such experiences are relevant in the analysis that follows:

My dad committed suicide when I was a baby. And then my stepdad committed suicide when I was nine […] I saw my stepdad when he hung himself […] I ended up in a secure training centre when I was 14 […] Then when my youngest son died, I just couldn't cope and I was drinking and taking drugs, fighting and I tried to commit suicide. That was a month before I came in on this sentence.[4]

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[4]Here, to maintain the anonymity of our participants, we include no identifiers or pseudonyms. Elsewhere in the article, we use pseudonyms, and have amended identifying features where appropriate.

I was in and out of foster care until the age of 14 […] I got sexually abused in two foster homes. … I lost my little girl when I was 18; she passed away […] My mum had come into my life when I was 18; she's an alcoholic. She chose her drink over me a lot of the time. She used to beat me with a rod … Before I come to prison, I was seven months pregnant with a little boy and he passed away inside me and I had to give still birth to him. … My mum turned around and said that she was glad both of my kids were dead, because I'd be an unfit mother anyway. …I didn't feel very secure until I met my ex-boyfriend, and that was the only time I felt secure. I don't know why I felt secure, because I was with him for eight years and he beat me every day.

Similar kinds of events certainly occurred in the lives of some of the men we interviewed, but they were less common, and less often multiple and cumulative. Accordingly, while we were all left reeling by some of the interviews with the male participants, the emotional toll of interviewing the women was much greater.[5] As Klempner (2000: 70, 72) notes: 'The recounting of a trauma narrative can be a psychically-charged event' and where the teller of a story engages in *re-externalization* of a trauma experience, the listener can become 'a "participant" and ever a "co-owner" of the traumatic event'. Individual and team debriefs became an important and necessary tool for us, but—more importantly—we were struck by the extraordinary emotional burdens that our participants were carrying and by their limited opportunities to process their feelings about their lives prior to imprisonment, their offences and the extremely long sentences that they were serving.

Results

The analysis of the research findings begins with the survey data, in order to provide a comparative overview of the differences between the problems experienced by the male and female prisoners in our sample, both in relative (rank) and absolute terms. The subsequent sections seek to explain and elaborate these findings by drawing on the interviews, particularly those conducted with the women. The rationale for skewing the content in this way is, first, that the problems of long-term imprisonment are even less well understood in relation to women than men, and, second, that so much that has been claimed about the generic problems of long-term confinement has been based on studies from which women have been excluded.

The survey data

As discussed elsewhere (Hulley *et al.* 2016), in terms of the rank ordering of the 'problems' of long-term imprisonment, the data from our male survey sample demonstrated remarkable consistency with previous studies (e.g. Richards 1978; Flanagan 1981). However, the findings from our subsequent surveys with women serving similar sentences showed important comparative differences, both in terms of the rank order of 'problems' and absolute differences in item 'severity'. Table 1 contrasts the ten problems rated as most severe by the male and female prisoners (with shaded items indicating problems that feature for both the men and the women).

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[5]All three authors were involved in interviewing the male participants, while the interviews with the female participants were undertaken only by Susie Hulley and Serena Wright.

TABLE 1   *Severity scores—top ten*

Rank no.	Survey problem items: women	Survey problem items: men
1	Having to follow other people's rules and orders	Missing somebody
2	Missing somebody	Worrying about people outside
3	Worrying about people outside	Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life
4	Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison	Having to follow other people's rules and orders
5	Thinking about the crime that you committed	Feeling that your life has been wasted
6	Wishing you had more privacy	Feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair
7	Feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends	Missing social life
8	Feeling anxious about the uncertainty of your release date	Thinking about the amount of time that you might have to serve
9	Feeling that your life has been wasted	Thinking about the crime that you committed
10	Feeling that the length of your sentence is unfair	Being afraid that someone you love or care about will due before you are released

It is clear, then, that some of the 'problems' of long-term imprisonment presented in the survey—such as 'Missing somebody', 'Feeling that your life has been wasted' and 'Thinking about the crime you committed'—resonated strongly with both the women and the men in our sample. However, these rankings mask considerable differences between the men and women in terms of absolute severity scores. These differences are demonstrated in Figure 1, in which the 39 problem statements are organized into nine thematic dimensions (and one stand-alone item, 'Thinking about the crime that you committed'), based on a Principal Components Analysis.

As this figure shows, the women's severity scores were considerably higher than those of the men across every thematic dimension, significantly so on five of them ('Anger/Frustration', 'Emotional & Physical Vulnerability', 'Outside Relationships', 'Release Anxiety' and 'Mental Wellbeing'). In six of these nine dimensions, the women's mean severity scores were higher than the men's across every individual item that comprised the dimension. This was particularly noticeable within those dimensions that explicitly relate to the emotional and psychological experience of long-term life imprisonment ('Anger/Frustration', 'Emotional & Physical Vulnerability' and 'Mental Wellbeing'). Further, even the women's lowest dimension severity score (10.31, for 'Mental Wellbeing') was higher than over half of the ten dimensions for men. To summarize, then, the pains and problems of long-term imprisonment were experienced with significantly greater severity by the women than the men.

Focussing more closely on some individual problems brings into sharp relief the gulf in absolute severity scores between the men and the women. Table 2 shows the ten problems for which the differences between the absolute mean scores were greatest, with the problems listed from greatest to the tenth greatest difference[6]:

Organizing the data in this way allows the identification of some of the most significant differences between the men and women, in terms of absolute acuteness of problems. The themes that stand out most here relate to psychological well-being ('losing
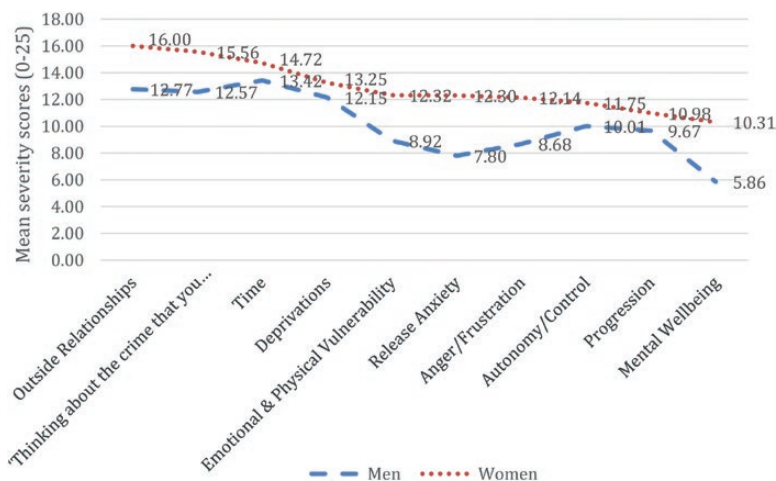
[6]*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Fig. 1 Severity scores for dimensions plotted against gender

Table 2   *Absolute severity scores: greatest difference between men and women*

Q. no.	Problem	Women's mean score	Men's mean score	Difference between absolute mean scores	Rank no. of difference
22	Losing your self-confidence	13.37***	6.74	6.63	1
28	Feeling suicidal	7.72**	1.45	6.27	2
20	Wishing you had more privacy	15.53***	9.65	5.88	3
57	Having to follow other people's rules and orders	20.50**	14.71	5.79	4
50	Feeling that you have no purpose or meaning in your life	12.47**	6.8	5.67	5
26	Feeling angry with yourself	12.74**	7.59	5.15	6
35	Worrying about how you will cope when you get out	12.42**	7.44	4.98	7
40	Feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends	15.39*	10.46	4.93	8
43	Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison	15.68*	10.98	4.7	9
42	Feeling that you have no control over your life	14.58*	10.17	4.41	10

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.01$.

your self-confidence', 'feeling suicidal', 'feeling angry with yourself'), intimacy ('wishing you had more privacy', 'not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison'), autonomy/control ('having to follow other people's rules and orders', 'feeling that you have no control over your life') and loss of family contact ('feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends'). We return to these issues shortly.

The table also enables us to see beyond similarities in rank scores. For example, 'Feeling suicidal' was ranked by the women as the 38th most severe problem, and by men as the 39th most severe problem. Yet the differences in the mean scores for these items (7.72 and 1.45, respectively) are vast. Similarly, 'Feeling that you have no one to talk to about the things that really matter to you' was ranked 25th and 28th by the women and

men, respectively, but the respective severity scores (11.32 and 7.61) again indicates that this problem was experienced much more acutely for the women than the men.

Table 3 lists the ten problems where the rank (or relative) difference between the men and women was greatest, with the problems listed from greatest to tenth greatest rank difference. Problems ranked more highly by the men than the women are shaded; those ranked more highly by the women than the men are unshaded.

All of the problems in this table where the rank score of the women is higher than that of the men also feature in Table 2, reflecting women's generally higher severity scores. Thus, 'Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison' and 'wishing you had more privacy' were experienced as considerably more severe by the women in both absolute and relative terms. Of the problems ranked as more severe in relative terms by the men compared to the women, three ('feeling sexually frustrated', 'missing social life' and 'being bored') related in some way to the absence of interpersonal stimulation.

Organizing the data in this manner also allows us to see beyond similarities in absolute scores. For example, 'Feeling that you are losing the best years of your life' was represented by almost identical severity scores (14.84 for women; 14.76 for women), but was, in relative terms, a greater concern for the men (rank: 3rd) than the women (rank: 11th). This reflected a common sentiment among the men that their 20s and 30s were decades when they ought to have been 'settling down', establishing careers, building financial security and passing symbolic milestones, such as passing their driving test.

In the remainder of the article, we build upon these findings to describe and explain the set of issues that appeared most relevant to the women in the study, seeking, where relevant, to highlight the ways in which these problems were different from those experienced by the men.

Losing contact

The loss or forfeiture of contact with friends and family appeared to affect women more than their male counterparts, and in different ways. Male interviewees more frequently reported that both the quality and frequency of their family contact had improved and

TABLE 3   *Relative severity: greatest difference between men and women*

Q. no.	Problem	Women's rank	Men's rank	Rank difference	Rank no. of difference
33	Feeling sexually frustrated	33	13	20	1
20	Wishing you had more privacy	6	23	17	2
22	Losing your self-confidence	18	32	14	3
43	Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison	4	16	12	4
27	Missing social life	19	7	12	5
48	Feeling frustrated that you are not progressing through the system	26	15	11	6
40	Feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends	7	17	10	7
50	Feeling that you have no purpose or meaning in your life	21	31	10	8
36	Being bored	29	19	10	9
26	Feeling angry with yourself	20	29	9	10

increased, referring primarily to their relationships with their parents. Comments such as 'I get on with my mum a lot better now than what I used to' were common, for example. In contrast, the women in the study often described far more limited relational support networks. In many cases, reduced family contact reflected a deliberate termination of communication by family members:

I don't have no contact with none of them; they've all changed their numbers, so I can't ring. My dad doesn't even speak to me, because of obviously the ultimatum that [my step-mother] has given him. (Tamara, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

Some interviewees, like Connie (aged 20s, 18-year tariff, Early), reported that friends on the outside had severed contact 'straightaway' because of the nature of the offence (i.e. murder). For others, immediate termination of support by some friends and family members related to the characteristics of the victim. For example, Bridget (20s, Early) had been convicted of the murder of a family member, leading to her being 'basically disowned' by an entire side of her family, who said she 'deserved to rot' in prison. In some cases, the shame and stigma of being related to a murderer put significant others at risk—some interviewees described parents and siblings being physically assaulted in the street.

In other cases, the severing of familial contact was instigated by the women themselves. This most often occurred where—as Murray (2005) also noted—incarceration 'offer[ed] relief' (p. 445) from historically abusive relationships with parental figures, siblings or intimate partners. Carly (30s, 16-year tariff, Late), for example, 'cut [her] family off' at the start of her sentence because of her growing sense of anger at the way her father had regularly beaten her and her sister during their childhoods. The narratives of trauma that saturated the women's accounts of life before prison were present in some of the men's life histories, but rarely to the degree of poly-victimization experienced by the women. Further, when the men disclosed poor nuclear relationships prior to imprisonment, these were far less often underpinned by sexual violence and domestic abuse. As a consequence, male participants were much less likely to terminate their familial relations as they struggled to adjust to their sentence.

In the main, however, women talked about 'loss of contact with family and friends' in terms of deteriorating relationships with their own children, reflecting the severe restrictions on fulfilling 'traditional' maternal role obligations imposed by incarceration (cf. LeFlore and Holston 1989; Owen 1998). One late-stage prisoner explained that[7]:

…the hardest thing for me when I came into jail was nobody told me how to not be a mum - I had spent so many years being a mum, I didn't know how to switch that off […] And like it never goes away; that missing them, and that kind of ache.

Hairston (1991: 95) claimed that the 'stripp[ing] of the mother role' was one of the 'most traumatic factors' in women's adjustment to imprisonment, an argument that our data strongly corroborated. For example:

I only get to see her three times a year […] and then that makes it really difficult because every time I see her it brings up all my feelings for her again, and then I spend the next four months grieving, […] so you're breaking your heart a little bit more every time. (Kathryn, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

[7]Full details have not been given here, and elsewhere in the article, to protect anonymity.

As suggested here, for many of the women we interviewed, remaining in touch with children in itself created significant distress, because of what Genders and Player (1990: 49) describe as the '"heart-rending" process of separation' that followed each visit.

In addition to the basic emotional distance that imprisonment engendered, geographical distance and financial hardship also contributed to relational degradation. In real terms, this meant that the 'loss of contact' experienced by women in the study could amount to many months or years passing without seeing their children:

I haven't seen my daughter since she was 18 months old - don't know what she looks like now. I wouldn't know her if she walked into a room. (Tori, 30s, 15-year tariff, Mid)

These factors underpinned women's disproportionately severe experience of this specific relational problem of long-term imprisonment. It is telling, in this regard, that of the three problems comprising 'outside relationships' ('worrying about people outside', 'Being afraid that someone you love or care about will die before you are released' and 'feeling that you are losing contact with family and friends'), the latter exhibited the largest difference between the men and women, both in terms of absolute and rank scores (15.39 for the women compared to 10.46 for the men; 7th and 17th most severe, respectively). While some of our male interviewees described the loss of contact with their children with similar sentiments of bereft desperation, they were in a minority (in part because fewer had dependent children at the time of their imprisonment), and reported far fewer of these difficulties with contact, communication, custody and control than did the women.

Power, autonomy, control

While our male participants rated 'having to follow other people's rules and orders' as the fourth most severe problem that they experienced, the female participants rated it as the most severe overall. Male and female respondents described their lack of control in similar terms, especially those in the early years of their sentence (see Crewe *et al.* 2016; Wright *et al.* 2016). However, in elaborating their feelings, the women were more likely to list the multitude of ways in which their intimate, daily practices were controlled.[8] For example:

To what extent do you feel that you've got control of your life in here?
Haven't really got much control at all ...you can't even pick what food you want because they dictate to you what's on the canteen sheet, they dictate to you your menu … Your clothes are restricted because you're only allowed a certain amount. You're not allowed an electric toothbrush. […] If you're poorly you can't control what medication you take [and] I find that quite difficult, not being in control of my own life. (Kathryn, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

You don't have control, you get told when to get up, you get told when to go to the dining room, you get told when to eat and when to go to work, when you can get your mail. You get told when you can get your medication. You get told when and where to do everything. (Eileen, 30s, 16-year tariff, Late)

These differences between the male and female participants were reflected in the women's significantly higher severity scores for 'Feeling that you have no control over your

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[8]Significantly, in discussing the ways that they established control in their lives, the women more often referred to intimate practices such as self-harm and restricted eating.

life' (14.58, compared to 10.17) and were bound up with the dynamics of dislocation from loved ones. Lack of control was very often expressed by the women in terms of not 'being able to pick the phone up when you want and ring your kids' or was related to custody battles in which they were psychologically stranded not only through uncertainty about the outcome but their lack of capacity to shape the process. When asked when she had felt 'deepest in the system', Kathryn (20s, 20+years' tariff, Early) replied that it was when fighting for custody of her baby with her ex-partner's parents, and 'realising that I really didn't have control over what they were going to say or what they were going to do'. Meanwhile, in the absence of a reliable partner (or parent) to bring children to visits, or to respond to requests for updates on the child's welfare, the mothers in our sample were often left in psychological limbo:

I sent [my ex-partner] photos of me and our baby a couple of weeks back […] with a letter asking how [my son] was and how he's getting on and I've had no reply from him […] It's hard to deal with. (Kathryn, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

I was meant to see [my son] Saturday, but he never turned up, and I don't know why […] I'm not allowed to know where he is, I'm not allowed a number, I'm not allowed nothing. (Fiona, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

The reporting of higher severity scores by the women compared to the men for these problems appeared to relate to differential experiences in their pre-prison lives, rooted in assaultive and abusive relationships. The connection between such victimizing relationships and feelings of powerlessness is well established (see Campbell *et al.* 1995; Finkelhor *et al.* 2007), and as other scholars have noted the prison environment itself reproduces a dynamic of abuse (e.g. Girshick 2003; Gartner and Kruttschnitt 2004).

In their testimonies of powerlessness, the women—much more often than the men—made explicit reference to established patterns of authority and subordination

I hate them telling me what to do because I'm *always* being told what to do, so I will like stick my heels in and shout and whatever. (Jackie, 30s, 16-year tariff, Late)

An officer was pointing at me and I told him, 'Don't point at me like that, because you're not my dad!' [and] he carried on, so I picked up a stapler and threw it at his head. (Eileen, 30s, 16-year tariff, Late)

I hate getting told what to do, because where my mum was never there telling me what to do, because I was the mum and I was telling everyone else what to do. I was like 'this is pissing me off right now! You are actually getting on my nerves', because some of the things they were asking me to do, like 'go to your room, go and get your food'. I'm not a child, yeah, like I might be in prison and I might be getting punished, but I'm not a child, I'm a fully-grown woman. … it felt like everything I had and any little bits of independence I had left, they'd taken it away. (Nadia, 20s, 18-year tariff, Early)

Here, then, the women's responses to the authority of prison staff were shaped primarily by their prior family dynamics and experiences of abuse (i.e. issues of trust) rather than by attitudes to authority figures in general (i.e. issues of 'respect', which featured more often in the narratives of our male interviewees). Ostensibly, then, such sentiments did not seem to reflect a sense that prison staff wilfully overused their authority: the problem of 'prison officers making life harder' was ranked as the 30th most severe by the women, and as the 22nd most severe problem by the men. However, during post-fieldwork feedback sessions, many women reported that it was not uncommon for

sexual power to be wielded over them by prison staff (such comments did not feature in interviews or discussions with our male participants).[9]

Meanwhile, as suggested in the final quotation, for some of the women, authority issues were bound up with moving from a position of independence and autonomy prior to imprisonment to one of enforced dependence and infantilization (see Genders and Player 1990; Carlen 1993; 1998). The men in the sample were far less often living independently of parents, as primary carers for children, and expressed such feelings far less frequently.

For many women, these overall feelings of powerlessness contributed significantly to struggles with mental health and well-being, the issue we move on to discuss in the section that follows:

When you're behind your door, it gets too much. … like it's I can't control it, because when you're in that room you're there on your own. Because when an attack happens, or a flashback happens it's hard because I can't walk out and go and talk to a friend about it. … You can't do that, and it's hard. (Nadia, 20s, 18-year tariff, Early)

Mental health and psychological well-being

'Mental health' problems cast a particularly long shadow across the experiences of women in the criminal justice system (cf. Rickford 2003). However, figures relating to officially diagnosed disorders (e.g. Social Exclusion Unit 2002) not only exclude consideration of those without a formal diagnosis, but also the periphery of concerns that relate to mental and emotional well-being. While a number of women in the study disclosed official diagnoses of conditions such as borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder, it was the women's broader discussions of their mental health, and their experiences of acute distress following conviction, which pervaded the interviews, as expressed in the following quotation:

I spent the first month in complete shock and I thought I would wake up and go home. It wasn't real […] And it hurt - it felt like somebody was ripping my chest open. I saw no future, no point to tomorrow. It was the darkest time of my life […] Because there was no going back - there was no changing this; there was no undoing it or fixing it, or making it better. And suddenly everything is ripped away from you, and feels like it's been taken to a different planet. (Maria, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

Often, emotions such as guilt, regret, anger and grief were manifest in forms of inward-facing violence, such as self-harm and suicidal ideation, aimed at punishing the self. Almost six times as many women as men (89 per cent compared to 15 per cent) reported self-injury or attempted suicide since their conviction, reflecting women's disproportionately high prison suicide rates (see Liebling 1999; Rickford 2003). Put another way, only two of the 19 women who completed the survey reported not having self-harmed or made an attempt on their life since receiving their sentence.

Women's psychological and emotional experiences of these long life sentences were bound up with their feelings about their index offence. While almost identical proportions of men and women considered themselves guilty of the murder for which they

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[9]We make no further comment on this issue only because we have insufficient data to enable us to do so.

had been convicted, the women seemed to ruminate more on the details of the offence, as reflected in the severity scores for the problem item 'Thinking about the crime you committed' (15.56 for women and 12.57 for men, ranked 5th and 9th, respectively). These reflections were often tied up with their mental health struggles, as the following quotations illustrate:

When do you feel that you sort of came to terms with the offence, if you feel that you have?
It hit me about six months down the line. Because I stopped taking the tablets and ... [pauses] The reason I stopped taking the tablets was because of what they had said, that I was a cold hearted person because I didn't cry at my trial and stuff. But I *couldn't* - I couldn't cry because they drugged me up [...] And it was weird when I came off them, I could feel remorse and them emotions inside me, do you know what I mean? It was crazy [...] I was really bad, I was self-harming and stuff like that, I even swallowed a razor blade...I've ligatured myself [...] I was on ACCT[10] document for nearly 4 to 5 weeks, constant watch. (Laura, 20s, 18-year tariff, Early)

I've come to terms with my sentence, [but] I struggle to come to terms with the actual events. And to this day I struggle to talk about it because obviously I'm ashamed, I'm... I'm every emotion you can think [...]. I was looking in mirrors and hoping that I would see the victim so I could talk to them, and... It was just really messed up crap [...] that's when like I started cutting myself. (Carly, 30s, 16-year tariff, Late)

Anniversaries—of the murder, of meeting the victim, of the victim's birthday and of the conviction, for example—were a particular source of difficulty. Gail explained that every five-year anniversary of her index offence, she would 'crash for a bit', and commented that, two decades later, 'It's never something that goes away … nothing you can do, no matter how hard you work, no matter what you do, it can never ever bring them back'.

While many of our male interviewees made similar comments, the women's narratives more often indicated that the acute guilt and self-hatred that they felt about the offence (even when describing themselves as being present under duress) overwhelmed their sense of self and contributed to self-destructive feelings and behaviour:

I tell people, 'I'm a horrible person' and they're like, 'No, you're not' and I was like, 'Oh, I am. Because if I wasn't why would I be here?' and that is how I look at it. Because if I wasn't a horrible person, why didn't I try and stop them? Yeah, I was scared; I was worried what they were going to do to me, but any normal person would have probably tried to stop them. And I didn't try nothing, I just sat there and cried my eyes out, like, 'Please stop!' (Tamara, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

My impulse then was on self-destruct. I wanted to hurt myself because I didn't wanna ever hurt anybody else again. I wanted to hurt myself.
And why did you want to hurt yourself so much?
Cos I'd murdered somebody. I had taken somebody's life who... who had a whole life ahead of her. (Tori, 30s, 15-year tariff, Late)

Similarly, disclosures of nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations related to the murder (see Wright *et al.* 2016) were far more prominent in the women's narratives than the men's, highlighting the extent to which 'Thinking about the crime you committed', psychological distress and mental health problems were interlaced.

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[10]ACCT: Assessment, Care in Custody, Teamwork—the document used when prisoners are deemed at risk of suicide or self-harm.

Trust, privacy, intimacy

Girshick (1999: 84) wrote of women's prisons that 'the element of distrust is *always* present'. This was reflected in the survey ratings for the item 'Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison', which was ranked by the women as the fourth most severe problem that they experienced, compared to 16th by the men. Trust was a recurring issue in the interviews with the women, much more so than with the men, again reflecting the context of the women's lives prior to incarceration. With extraordinary consistency, they described the myriad ways in which their trust had been broken or abused, generally by parents, authority figures and intimate partners, who had sexually assaulted them, abandoned them or failed to care for them in fundamental ways. The fracturing of trust by the very people whom they believed loved them, and would protect them, had shattered their capacity and willingness to place trust in others, as the following quotations illustrate:

…when you've been let down by people that you're clo-, well, meant to be closest to, it's hard to - do you know what I mean - trust others. (Deena, 20s, 15-year tariff, Mid)

I've got proper bad trust issues as well, so it's really hard for me to trust people. (Tamara, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

I don't class people as my friend easily, like yeah, I've got mates, but...I don't have friends ... I have trust issues anyway in general. (Carly, 30s, 16-year tariff, Late)

Very often, trust in others had been corroded in a cumulative manner, so that the psychological consequences of intimate and domestic abuse were compounded by a perception that other family members and state organizations (e.g. social services, local authorities, the police) had disbelieved their claims or failed to intervene on their behalf. The resulting form of generalized 'un-trust' had consequences for the women's relationships with prison staff and with their fellow prisoners. With both, they offered trust extremely cautiously, and were acutely sensitive to being let down:

I find it hard to make attachments to people and to trust people so you sort of like...you're always cautious. (Kathryn, 20s, 20+ years' tariff, Early)

Where do you think the kind of feeling of lack of safety … comes from?
I think it's due to, like, my trust issues. Obviously, I trusted my dad quite a lot and he just, phew…
Yeah, betrayed that.
Yeah, and then I felt very trusting of staff, and then she did that last week so it's like, oh my God! (Bridget, 20s, 18-year tariff, Early)

While the social affiliations of male prisoners (particularly those early on in their sentences) were often built around relatively instrumental considerations (such as protection and material support), the women far more often explained that trust was the essential component of the relationships they sought out:

What's the single most important thing that you get from your friends in here?
The trust, the trust of somebody...the trust of somebody I think. That's the most important thing for me in here. (Laura, 20s, 18-year tariff, Early)

What's the most important thing that Helena gives you as a friend in here?
Trust. … I can trust her without thinking that she's manipulating me. (Liz, 20s, 15-year tariff, Early)

There was a deep tension, then, between these women's embedded anxieties about extending trust and their deep yearning for intimacy. This tension was compounded by the 'jungle'-like culture of women's prisons (cf. Genders and Player 1990: 55), in which close relationships were constantly threatened through forms of 'relationship talk' which were described to us recurrently as 'bitching', 'gossiping' and 'backstabbing':

What's it like to spend time in like an almost all female environment?
It's horrendous. It's horrendous. …. when you get in relationships and the girls find out, [or] even if you're friends with somebody who somebody else doesn't want you to be friends with, they come out with saying 'Well she said this behind your back, she said this behind your back' or 'She said you're fat'. (Kathryn, 20s, 20+years' tariff, Early)

You've got so many bitchy, conniving, back-stabbing people in here. They like to go, 'Well, she said this and she said that', and 'no, actually, she said this…' and it's just bullshit. (Tamara, 20s, 20+ years' tariff, Early)

As also suggested in these quotations, this culture meant that the emotional dimensions of private life and relationships were public currency:

I don't think you can have a healthy relationship in prison, because you don't have a relationship just with the person, you have a relationship with the person and the rest of the wing, because they've all got opinions. […] You can't do anything in private in here […] In prison you become such public property.

Thus, while our male interviewees characterized prison life as emotionally repressive, in which feelings were largely kept private, the women described an environment whose emotional intensity was suffocating. On the one hand, emotional support was much more readily available than it was for the men; yet at the same time, emotions were ubiquitous to the point of being overwhelming (see Greer 2002).

This absence of emotional privacy is significant, given that women ranked 'wishing you had more privacy' as the sixth most severe problem that they experienced, compared to 23rd among the men, and with a significantly higher absolute score. In their interviews, the female prisoners sometimes commented on the literal lack of privacy that imprisonment engendered, in particular, their visibility to male officers when undertaking intimate practices, e.g. using the toilet, getting dressed, washing (see also Genders and Player 1990; Carlen 1998; Moran *et al.* 2013).[11] More often though, they were referring to forms of emotional claustrophobia, the ways that other prisoners abused personal disclosures, and the difficulties of being the subject of public discourse:

I like it when that door is shut, that's you and that's your time. No one coming to your door … no one ain't going to come to your door and bother you and things like that […] I do miss that, like having that privacy and just sometimes when you just want to be by yourself, and you just don't want anyone around you. (Deena, 20s, 15-year tariff, Mid)

Concluding comments

As many scholars have noted, 'at best, [women] remain marginal to the study and practice of imprisonment' (Moore and Scraton 2014: 1). This article aims to redress this pattern

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[11]Personal privacy was also threatened by the interventions of the prison, even when these were intended to be benign. Several interviewees described a feeling of being intrusively policed when placed on self-harm monitoring measures, for example.

by comparing the problems of long-term confinement as experienced by male and female prisoners, and then detailing the most significant and distinctive problems reported by the latter. In doing so, rather than let the research questions or framework be overdetermined by presumptions about gender roles and behaviours, it instead tries to foreground gender within the analysis. Such an approach has a number of benefits. First, it develops the literature on long-term imprisonment, in which women have tended to be neglected, by engaging with general questions about the problems experienced by men and women serving very long sentences. Second, it pulls into focus those aspects of long-term confinement that appear to be experienced differently by men and women, in ways that might encourage other researchers to proceed with caution before generalizing about the nature of long-term imprisonment. Third, it attempts to connect some of the gendered dimensions of confinement to key penological issues, such as power, authority, trust and well-being, which are not always visible in the study of women's imprisonment generally.

There are a number of implications for the theorization of gender and imprisonment. In a previous publication (Wright *et al.* 2016), we argued that patterns of adjustment to the early years of long prison sentences were best understood with regard to what we called an 'offence-time nexus'. That is, the adaptive patterns of long-term prisoners were comprehensible only when seen in relation to the specific offence of murder and the temporal character of receiving an exceptionally long sentence at an early age. Our findings here suggest that, with regard to female prisoners, alongside time and the offence, the impact of traumatic life events prior to the sentence provides an additional and elemental adaptive dynamic. The long-term imprisonment of women not only 'incorporates and amplifies all the anti-social modes of control that oppress women outside prison' (Carlen 1998: 3). It also interacts with and compounds the forms of trauma and degradation that almost all of the women in our study had suffered prior to their sentence. Imprisonment (and acts of serious offending themselves) reproduced feelings of low self-worth and shame that derived from experiences of abuse (see Girshick 2003). The emotional deprivations of prison life—in confluence with the gendered ways in which female lifers were abandoned by their loved ones, and themselves severed abusive relational obligations—incited female lifers to seek out forms of intimacy they simultaneously feared, due to prior experiences of having their trust shattered. And the loss of autonomy that imprisonment entailed was particularly painful, first, because of its impact on relationships with children, second, because it echoed the powerlessness that these women had experienced in their lives outside, and, third, because—paradoxically—most were accustomed to managing 'the minutiae of everyday living' (Carlen 1998: 88) relatively autonomously.

Gender is relevant here, then, for the reasons that Carlen (1998: 133) sets out: because of women's distinctive family roles, particularly as primary caregivers; and because of the meanings attached by themselves and others to their offences and to their state of incarceration. In particular, the distinctive social and cultural dimensions of women's confinement mean that issues such as power, control and trust have different meanings for female than for male prisoners. The wider implication of this is that, as Bosworth (1996) argues, any consideration of penal legitimacy needs to take into account the different ways in which women might normatively assess the right of the state to confine them and the daily practices to which they are subjected. Women whose lives have been blighted by figures of authority—within the family and the state—will respond to and question penal authority in ways that differ from most men.

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The interactions between gender, imprisonment and the world beyond the prison are non-linear, and bidirectional. They cannot be captured through simple recourse to conventional penological theories of 'deprivation' and 'importation', not least because of the reflexive ways in which gender brings itself to bear on the ways that these female prisoners negotiate their predicament (Bosworth 1999). It is more helpful, therefore, as Bosworth (1996: 15) advocates, to explore imprisonment as an institution embedded in a broader web of gendered power relations and social dynamics, or, to quote Adrien Howe, to explore the punishment of women 'without losing sight of women prisoners, and also without limiting the focus to the penal sphere' (Howe 1994: 164). One pay-off in doing so is that it enables us to see the connections between the kinds of 'private', domestic and sexual matters whose dominance in the field Liebling identifies, and the wider regimes of punishment, pain and power that Carlen highlights.

Seeking to understand how women experience long sentences is not possible without grasping the multiplicity of abuse and abjection that the great majority of them have experienced in the community, or without recognizing their emotional commitments and biographies. Yet this is not to imply either that women and their carceral experiences are reducible to their emotions, or that they are passive victims of power and circumstance, in the community or in prison.[12] There is no necessary contradiction between recognizing the multiple victimization experienced by the majority of female prisoners, while also attributing them with agency, rationality and voice. The prison may be an 'institutional manifestation of gendered powerlessness and vulnerability' (Moore and Scraton 2014: 53), but, like men serving very long sentences, female lifers actively navigate the prison system, push back against the demands and intrusions of penal power, and come to find meaning and purpose in their lives inside. It is important, nonetheless, to be aware that they do so while undergoing a set of deprivations and debasements that render their time in prison more acutely painful and problematic than their more numerous male counterparts.

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[12]Nor is it to suggest that biographical trauma and emotional issues are irrelevant to the adaptions of male prisoners, although their form and intensity may differ.

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