

# BOOK REVIEWS

Lucy Baldwin, *Gendered Justice: Women, Trauma and Crime*, Waterside Press 2022

This collection of articles and reports of recent research has 18 contributors, covering a wide range of experiences, expertise and professions. Among them are two women, writing anonymously, who have had lived experience of the criminal justice system (CJS). Among the authors are academics, the Women's Lead, East Midlands and the Women's Lead, West Midlands Probation Service, a consultant clinical forensic psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and Kate Paradine, formerly the CEO of Women in Prison and now Visiting Adjunct Fellow at the Stefan Cross Centre for Women, Equality and Law, University of Southampton and CEO of Voice 21 (<https://voice21.org/>). Professor Loraine Gelsthorpe, Director of the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge has provided the foreword.

As one would expect, given the range of expertise and experience, this book provides a committed and indeed passionate call for a gender- and trauma-informed approach to women in the CJS, as well as reports of much important and interesting recent research and a wide range of information, insights and expertise. As Professor Gelsthorpe writes in the foreword: 'They encourage implementation of a holistic approach, and suggest ways of ensuring 'justice' rather than injustice'. As put by one of the authors, what is needed is an 'ethics of empathy' and compassion, in order to ensure that criminal justice is linked to social justice.

In her introduction, the editor, Lucy Baldwin sets out the theme of the book: 'We know that women who come into contact with the CJS, i.e. who become criminalised and labelled as 'offenders', have rarely escaped traumatic experiences in their lives. The lines between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are often blurred, especially concerning women ... Many if not most women who come into contact with the CJS, have experienced trauma as an adult, as a child or often both'. Thus the call for a trauma-informed approach to women in the CJS.

Here is a vivid and tragic illustration of the trauma referred to above. Readers will remember Ms A, now known to be Rianna Cleary, who was in prison in HMP Bronzefield, Surrey, on remand in September 2019 when she went into labour, and pressed the cell call button for help. There was no response. The next morning her cell was found awash with blood and her baby was found dead in her arms. It was indeed a shocking event, causing much comment in the media. Many asked: why was this very vulnerable 18 year-old, eight months pregnant and ill at the time, sent by magistrates to prison on remand (R. Epstein, G. Brown, M. Garcia De Frutos: Why are pregnant women in prison? Coventry University, 2022. <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2020/why-are-pregnant-women-in-prison/>). The answer was not revealed by the Ombudsman's report (despite that report stating that its purpose was both to examine both the reasons for remand in custody and the circumstances of the ante-natal care and the unattended birth). The reason was revealed in a *Guardian* interview on 2 August 2023 (Interview by Diane Taylor, the Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/aug/02/the-tragedy-of-rianna-and-baby-aisha-cleary-teenager-gave-birth-all-alone-in-a-prison-cell>). Ms Cleary had *asked to be sent to prison on remand* as she believed that prison would provide help and support. What was the level of trauma in her life and in the circumstances under which she was accused of a crime for her to ask to go to prison?

Dr Nicola Harding's chapter reports on, and is written with 28 women with experience of the CJS. It explores the trauma in their lives before imprisonment, and the further trauma caused by incarceration. It is painful to read, and underlines the importance of the theme and purpose of this powerful book. Her chapter begins: 'When a woman enters the Criminal Justice System it is often the most recent catastrophic event in a life that has been punctuated by trauma'. The author 'invites those who work with women in criminal justice to understand a little more, enabling the creation of trauma-informed spaces, and condemn a little less'.

Isla Masson and Natalie Booth's chapter reports on their 2021 research on the experiences of mothers (including step-mothers and foster mothers) and grandmothers of women in custody on remand. They give a wide-ranging, in-depth and vivid picture of the many difficulties faced by these family members supporting both the families outside and the women in prison. This is, in my view, a very important study, which has not received the wide coverage it is due. It is indeed tragic to think of so much suffering imposed on women and their families, when the incarceration is *on remand*, that is the 'offender' has not yet been found guilty or not yet sentenced. Very few women commit violent offences, very rarely do they pose any danger to the public. We have to ask, and keep on asking again and again, why they are in custody on remand. After this book was published JUSTICE published its report on the reasons so many people are in prison on remand.<sup>1</sup> It is largely due to hasty and poorly considered decision-making on the part of magistrates (see R. Epstein, *Remand decision-making: what is going wrong* <https://www.thejusticegap.com/remand-decision-making-what-is-going-wrong/>, and *Women on Remand in Custody*, The Justice Gap <https://www.thejusticegap.com/women-in-prison-remand-in-custody/>).

Kate Paradine argues that if academics, charities and practitioners are to maximise their impact and create real change in the imprisonment of women, they need to focus on three areas for change:

- Strengthening the case for feminist prison abolition and building a vision for the future (while focusing on the 'long game' of the incremental victories that are needed);
- Speaking out for change together, amplifying their collective voices; and
- Sharing power and creating new collaborative tools for change.

This book is a rich source of information and insights into the situation of women in the CJS, as well as a call for action. As Lucy Baldwin points out in her introduction, it is a tragedy and a sad indictment and reflection on society, that women, particularly women living with, or escaping traumatic experiences, have described prison as the 'safest place I've ever been'.

We will let Professor Gelsthorpe have the last word: 'This is an important and inspirational book which should be compulsory reading for policy-makers and sentencers'.

*Dr Rona Epstein, Honorary Research Fellow, Coventry Law School*

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<sup>1</sup> Remand Decision-Making in the Magistrates' Court, Justice <https://files.justice.org.uk/uploads/2023/11>