



Invisible Women:

Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment

Claudia Vince and Emily Evison

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 programme that is exploring the experiences of people who will spend over 10 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 desk-based research, group discussions, letters and emails from women serving long sentences and meetings and conversations with senior managers. This briefing focuses predominantly on the landscape of women in England and Wales. However, future work will explore the experiences of women in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Credits and acknowledgements

This briefing was prepared by Claudia Vince, Programme Coordinator for the Prison Reform Trust Building Futures programme and Emily Evison, Policy Officer (women and equalities) and other colleagues. We are grateful to Dr Serena Wright, from Royal Holloway University of London for thoughts and advice and HMP Send for comments on an earlier draft.

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Introduction to this briefing

Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's National Lottery funded five-year programme that is focused on improving the experiences of people serving very long custodial sentences in England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.¹ Through consultation, advocacy and research, we will collaborate with long-term prisoners to shed light on how long sentences impact prisoners themselves, their families and the communities they come from. We will be working with prisoners and former prisoners, prisoners' families, staff, and other key stakeholders to highlight the human impact of the surge in these extreme sentences that were, until relatively recently, comparatively rare.

As a key component of the Building Futures programme, our 'Invisible Women' work will explore how long-term imprisonment (defined as sentences during which 10 years or more will be served in custody) uniquely affects women. In particular, we will draw on recent findings that identify particular aspects of long-term imprisonment which are especially painful and damaging for women.² By creating space for women serving these sentences to share their experiences, we will consider how such lengthy sentences affect the lives of the women themselves.

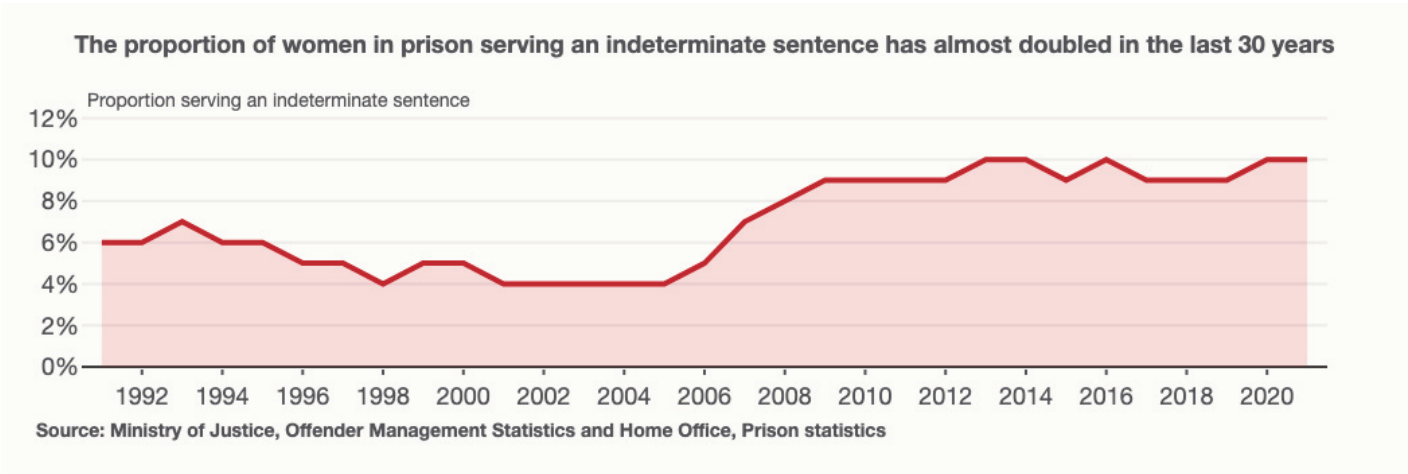
The quotes included draw on recent consultation work with women who have direct experience of long-term imprisonment. We have spoken to two women who are now in the community and 14 women still in custody via letters, emails and visits. The aim of this briefing is to introduce this area of work and bring to light some key themes that have been identified through our early conversations with women. This is the first in a series of 'Invisible Women' briefings and it will form an ongoing area of work within the Building Futures programme. We believe the quotes from the women themselves help to illustrate the issues they have faced, demonstrating why this focus is important and necessary. All names have been omitted to protect the identities of women involved in our work.

The context: the rise of women serving long custodial sentences

In recent years, campaigns to reduce the number of women in prison have tended to contrast the harmfulness of imprisonment with the relatively non-serious nature of most women's offending. Many women in prison are serving sentences for non-violent offences, with the majority (70%) receiving sentences of less than 12 months.³ 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, their urgency should not lead to the needs of those serving longer sentences for more serious offences being overlooked. The lack of visibility of women serving long prison sentences in policy and advocacy debates means their experiences are not fully recognised.

Over the last thirty years, the number of people serving extreme sentences in both women and men's prison estates has increased significantly, with longer average tariff lengths and increases in the overall amount of time spent in custody. In 2003, the average tariff length for murder was 12.5 years; by 2020 it stood at 20 years.⁴ The population of life-sentenced prisoners has risen from 1,322 in 1979⁵ to 6,963 at the end of June 2021.⁶ As a result, the use of life imprisonment in England and Wales now surpasses all of Western Europe.⁷

These overall trends have also been reflected among women. As demonstrated in the below figure, the proportion of the women’s prison population who are serving indeterminate sentences declined overall from 6% to 4% between 1991 and 2005, before nearly doubling from 6% to 10% between 2005 and 2013, and remaining roughly constant since then. During the whole thirty-year period, the number of women in prison serving an indeterminate sentence has grown from 96 in 1991, to 328 in 2021.⁸



While this work will consult with women serving both indeterminate and long determinate sentences, the women who contributed to this briefing were all serving indeterminate sentences of some kind. In our future work we will collaborate with women serving long determinate sentences to ensure the voices of these women are also brought to light.⁹

The core concerns of ‘Invisible Women’: key challenges for women serving custodial sentences

Undertaken predominantly via remote means of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, our early conversations with women serving at least 10 years in custody coalesced around three core issues:

- The impact of previous trauma
- Familial relationships and reproductive capacity
- Progression support

While these issues are common to many imprisoned women, the lengthy terms being served are likely to significantly enhance and compound these pains. These are now examined briefly in turn and related to what we already know about criminalised women (and, where possible, those serving long sentences).

The impact of trauma: pathways to prison and the impact of imprisonment

Women in prison typically have extensive histories of trauma, substance misuse issues and mental health difficulties. In relation to women serving long, indeterminate sentences, their 'life histories read as catalogues of suffering and abuse'.¹⁰ In a study of women serving life sentences, 60% reported histories of sexual abuse, 80% had experienced physical abuse and 54% had been victims of both sexual and physical abuse.¹¹ Nearly 60% of women in prison report having been victims of domestic abuse as adults, and coercion by partners is a distinctive route into criminality and prison for some women.¹² In cases of serious violence, coercive relationships with male co-defendants may impose 'contextual limits to [women's] sense of agency'¹³, whereby the nature of their relationship and the fear they have of their partners contribute to their involvement in the offence, or their inability to prevent/report the offence. This history of violent victimisation and coercion means that women serving long sentences are usually both victims and perpetrators, and also usually traumatised.

Research has shown this overlap between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' can mean the prison experience, and aspects of the prison environment, are more acutely painful and distressing. Harsh, unnatural lighting, sterile spaces, loud unexpected noises and showers that lack privacy are physical features of prison spaces that are likely to be re-triggering for those with histories of trauma.¹⁴ Pat downs, strip searches and other unwanted physical contact can be extremely distressing for survivors of abuse.¹⁵

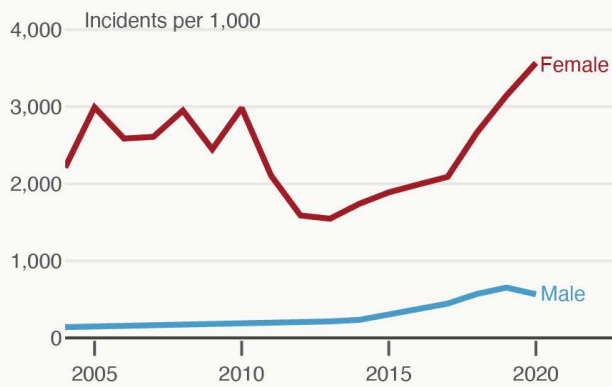
Women have been subject to various forms of abuse but some officers don't take this into consideration and are often kicking your cell door to frighten you, they walk in without knocking or they will knock and still walk in when you've asked them to wait because you are in a state of undress.

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Styal)

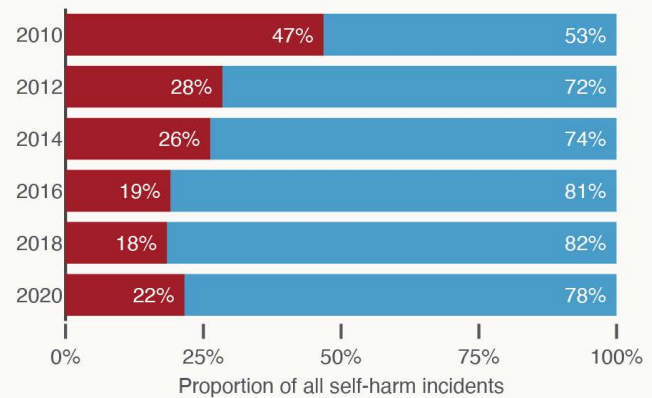
Whilst women serving sentences of all lengths are subject to these environments, those serving longer sentences are more exposed to repeat traumatisation. Understanding the impact of this is a key objective for Invisible Women.

Pre-prison experiences of trauma can manifest in a number of ways, particularly in relation to feelings of guilt, regret, anger and grief and the expression of inward-facing violence.¹⁶ Since 2016, there have been 24 self-inflicted deaths in prisons holding women in England.¹⁷ As noted by the figure below, women account for disproportionately high rates of self-harm and suicide within prisons. The right-hand figure demonstrates the proportion of self-harm incidents recorded in men and women's prisons. The falling share is accounted for by a rise in self-harm in male prisons, rather than a fall in self-harm in women's prisons. Even when the proportion of self-harm incidents in women's prison is comparatively low (for instance 19% in 2016), this still represents a disproportionate number of self-harm incidents when considering the small size of the women's prison population.

Rates of self-harm are significantly higher for women



Source: Ministry of Justice, Safety in Custody Statistics



For women serving indeterminate sentences, the nature of the sentence and the uncertainty and fear associated with it can bring about distressing and destructive emotions, leading to self-harm and suicide attempts.¹⁸

Being housed alongside other women with histories of trauma means that women regularly witness extreme self-harm and mental health crises, when they themselves are already suffering. This can create additional trauma while serving the sentence:

I'd never experienced self-harm until I went to prison, then I saw it on a massive scale...It's not something I'd seen before, I'd not seen people cut, walking down the landing and they're cut to the bone.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

There seems very little support when we experience a death in custody, and or serious self-harm. I have experienced approximately 10 deaths in custody in the years I have been in and they are never easy to deal with.

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Styal)

Exposure to such incidents is likely to have a direct impact on women's ability to cope with their sentence and may aggravate feelings of depression and anxiety.¹⁹ As the quote below demonstrates, hearing stories of trauma and abuse from other women can lead to extreme distress.

Prisons need to be more trauma-informed. Staff need to be trauma-trained. In my time in prison...I heard some horrendous stories. I'd wake up in the morning and I'd be totally happy, then I'd go into group therapy and come out suicidal because other people's trauma would trigger my trauma and you're just left to sit with it.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

Women lacking specialist support can feel isolated in their trauma, and for those serving indeterminate sentences, concerns regarding risk and progression may prevent them from reaching out to staff for support. Particularly for women serving long sentences, who are exposed to these environments for such a lengthy period, the long-term consequences may include social withdrawal and emotional numbing, which may cause issues for life in the community post-release.²⁰

The introduction of Trauma-Informed Care and Practice has been welcomed by many as having the potential to, if properly implemented, ameliorate many of the traumas experienced by women in prison. However, its implementation has been to varying success, with some oversimplification of what it means to be properly trauma-informed, tending to revolve around cosmetic improvements to prison spaces. The security function of prison often takes precedence over care.²¹

The difficulties of maintaining family contact

Losing contact with children is one of the most distressing elements of imprisonment for women serving sentences of all lengths, but women serving long sentences are likely to be impacted in particularly stark ways.²² Whilst official data on the number of women entering custody with dependent children is not routinely collected, a 2019 estimate for the number of children affected by maternal imprisonment in England and Wales is 17,000.²³ The Ministry of Justice suggest that between 13 and 19 per cent of all women receiving immediate custody have dependent children.²⁴ Since many women are primary care givers or lone parents, the impact on children is highly disruptive and traumatising, with only 9% of children remaining in the family home when their mother goes to prison.²⁵ When a mother is imprisoned, their children have been found to suffer a range of harmful impacts, including grief, stigmatisation and feelings of isolation.²⁶

Imprisoned women suffer psychological and emotional pain as a result of losing contact with their children, damaging their mental health and their ability to engage with the regime and progress through their sentence.²⁷ Attempts to maintain contact with children can also be hard, as the process of separation that takes place at the end of every face-to-face visit causes extreme distress for both mothers and their children.²⁸ Whilst separation from children is also acutely painful for men in prison, they report fewer difficulties surrounding contact, communication, custody and control than women.²⁹ Additionally, women are often held far away from their home towns, with the average distance between home and prison being 63 miles, but with a significant number being held more than 100 miles from home (compared to an average of 50 miles for men).³⁰ The practicalities of the cost and time of organising visits means many women also struggle to maintain regular face-to-face contact with their children. This can create scenarios in which women's family visits can be counted on one hand, even as time served creeps into double digits:

I saw my mum about four times in fourteen years. I saw my son twice. I saw my sister about four times and I saw my dad more. When I went to another prison I was about 200 miles away from home so my dad only came once at Christmas.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

For women who do not have children when sentenced, facing a very long prison sentence may force them to re-evaluate their aspirations for becoming mothers. As the window of biological fertility holds much greater significance for women than for men, as men can still father children later in life, this a particularly gendered pain of imprisonment.³¹ Whilst not all women will aspire to have children, many will suffer as a result of long-term imprisonment as they are 'stripped of the mother role', which can be one of the most traumatic factors of prison life.³²

In terms of relationships with other family members, women serving long sentences – particularly for serious offences – often describe 'far more limited relational support networks' than men.³³ Long-term women prisoners sentenced at a young age in particular may struggle, when compared

to the greater familial support provided to their male counterparts.³⁴ The core family unit for women is often more disjointed, complex, and characterised by trauma. As a result, while for some family contact can be a lifeline, for others it may be a source of distress. This indicates why an individualised approach to family contact is essential.³⁵

A lack of progression opportunities and specialist spaces

For anyone serving an indeterminate sentence, uncertainty and frustration commonly come to define their time in prison. Feelings of powerlessness can translate into hopelessness and helplessness for women who perceive they lack control in their lives and cannot plan for the future.³⁶

People subject to these sentences have to be consistently and actively engaged in the rehabilitative process to demonstrate their risk has reduced. In some instances, this preoccupation with risk reduction may be costly. For instance, women may have to relocate to a prison further away from home to access interventions or courses on their sentence plan, to the detriment of contact with family. As HMP Send is the only women's prison in England with a therapeutic community, women serving indeterminate sentences may be expected to relocate here for a portion of their sentence. This may lead to difficulties in other aspects of their life, particularly contact with children and family:

Transfers to other prisons are extremely traumatic not just for us but for our families and friends. We are often moved many miles away, which causes visiting problems due to transport, ill health and financial problems.

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Styal)

As is common for people serving indeterminate sentences, concern for being viewed as a 'poor copier', for fear of what this could mean for their progression, can mean women are unwilling to access support. Being vulnerable is often equated with risk and the need for care with the need for continued confinement or monitoring:

Because you're a lifer, you're frightened to show that you're weak, because it will be used against you. It will come up in your parole report "she wasn't coping well, she's self-harmed, she has suicidal thoughts" – you know, so you tend to lean on other inmates to get you to a better place.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

As a long term prisoner I feel that we are often overlooked, have no needs met and are often left to do our own thing. We are also too frightened to stand up for what is right in fear of it being misreported and it having an impact on our parole

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Styal)

When you're serving a sentence like that, you're watched all the time and everything is documented. Anything could be seen as going wrong or 'high risk' when actually you're just having a shit week. But you can't tell anyone because you're frightened that it's going to get used against you two years down the line when you sit parole.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

This may make women hesitant to go to staff for support or for access to mental health interventions, over concern that it might be held against them later. Not only this, but participation in non-trauma-informed offending behaviour programmes can be emotionally costly, re-triggering past trauma and negatively impacting on mental health.³⁷

There is a lack of gender-specific provision in this area, with many women undertaking offending behaviour programmes that were originally designed for men.³⁸ This means that courses may not adequately acknowledge trauma histories or experiences of abuse, meaning they could be ineffective or even harmful. The Female Offender Strategy notes that interventions designed specifically with women in mind are likely to be more effective at addressing offending behaviour and rehabilitating women,³⁹ yet it is unclear whether this lesson has been applied to women in the long-term and high-secure estate.

There is no structure for long termers, there should be more support.

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Drake Hall)

We feel it is still such a male orientated environment...I feel personally that we as women are not listened to.

(woman serving life sentence, HMP Foston Hall)

Additionally, the predominance of women in prison are serving sentences of under 12 months, coupled with a relatively small estate, means that some women serving long sentences have to share cells with individuals serving sentences that represent only a fraction of their own. This can destabilise their capacity and willingness to develop support networks with shorter-sentenced peers:

Even when I just got sentenced, they put me in a cell and put another woman in with me who'd just been sentenced to two years...she was bawling her eyes out. I was in shock and they just put someone in with me who had just got two years...I shouldn't have been put in that situation.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

Specialist spaces for women serving long sentences could mitigate this. The women we spoke to recognised that being in regular contact with other long-termers could be a valuable source of support:

The prisons could improve by letting them get to speak to other women. Instead they let the staff try to help. Staff don't have a clue. Also to be put on a wing with long termers, they should have a wing, not to be forgotten about.

(woman serving life sentence, in the community)

Being housed alongside other women serving similar sentences would allow for supportive friendships to be forged. Whilst some prison establishments facilitate lifer forums to offer space for this population to share their experiences, the regularity and effectiveness of these groups vary, and groups are often cancelled as a result of staffing or resourcing difficulties.⁴⁰ It is important to recognise that relationships between prisoners are not always straight-forward, however having the opportunity to discuss their experiences of long-term imprisonment could

provide a sense of shared experience. Particularly when it comes to navigating the sentence and progressing towards release, being in contact with women who are familiar with the process could provide some much-needed advice and informal support:

I think it might be about lifers who have gone through the parole process being able to advise people coming up to a parole about what they might look for.
(woman serving life sentence, HMP Foston Hall)

Women recognise that much of the provision for long-term prisoners is male-orientated. There is a scarcity of specialist units for women serving long-term sentences, and many women are forced to wait for spaces to become free on small therapeutic communities or lifer units. If participating in a therapeutic community is on a woman's sentence plan, progression can halt whilst she waits for space to become available.

Conclusion

These real-life examples demonstrate that the reality of a long, indeterminate sentence can be isolating, distressing and uncertain. A lack of gender-specific intervention for women serving these sentences means that women's needs are not fully recognised or understood. The following excerpt from the Female Offender Strategy exemplifies this issue:

Almost all of the women sentenced to custody will one day be released into the community. Reforming and rehabilitating these offenders must be a priority if we are to reduce crime, reduce reoffending and protect victims. Yet outcomes for female offenders in custody are poor and can be worse than for men. Women suffer higher rates of self-harm and a greater proportion of women in prison have experienced domestic abuse and have mental health problems than men. On release a smaller proportion have settled accommodation to support their transition back into the community.⁴¹

This briefing is an introduction to our 'Invisible Women' work, and the work will provide opportunities for women who have experiences of these sentences, to collaborate and advocate for more holistic, gender-specific, trauma-informed approaches to the long-term imprisonment of women. We will build our work from the ground up, creating spaces for women serving these sentences to have their voices heard, ensuring the work has the most meaningful impact. Following further collaboration and consultation with women, we will offer recommendations to policymakers to improve the experiences of women serving long sentences. Only by directly involving women in consultation, advocacy and research work can we ensure that our prison system is fair and humane. As noted by Baroness Corston 14 years ago, equal outcomes for men and women require different approaches.⁴² In order to prevent undue harm coming to women serving these sentences, a distinct approach for women subject to long-term imprisonment is vital.

If you are a woman who has experience of serving a sentence that involves over 10 years in prison, and you would be interested in being involved in our work, please write to us at the following address:

Invisible Women
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Endnotes

- ¹ For further information about the PRT Building Futures programme and a range of publications and resources about women in the criminal justice system see <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projectsresearch/BuildingFutures>
- ² Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 57, 1359 – 1378.
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- ¹⁴ Jewkes, Y., Jordan, M., Wright, S. & Bendelow, G. (2019) 'Designing 'Healthy' Prisons for Women: Incorporating Trauma-Informed Care and Practice (TICP) into Prison Planning and Design' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16, 3818.
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- ¹⁷ Inquest (2020). *Deaths in prison: A national scandal* London: Inquest.
- ¹⁸ Smart, S. (2018). 'Too many bends in the tunnel? Women serving Indeterminate Sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection – what are the barriers to risk reduction, release and resettlement?' The Griffins Society.
- ¹⁹ Jewkes, Y., Jordan, M., Wright, S. & Bendelow, G. (2019) 'Designing 'Healthy' Prisons for Women: Incorporating Trauma-Informed Care and Practice (TICP) into Prison Planning and Design' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16, 3818.
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- ²⁴ Niven and Stewart. (2005). *Resettlement outcomes on release from prison*. Home Office Findings 248. London: Home Office. Referenced in in MOJ (2014). *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds*.
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- ³⁰ Lord Farmer (2019) The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime, London: MoJ Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF (accessed 27 August 2021)
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- ³⁶ Smart, S. (2018). 'Too many bends in the tunnel? Women serving Indeterminate Sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection – what are the barriers to risk reduction, release and resettlement?' The Griffins Society.
- ³⁷ ibid
- ³⁸ ibid
- ³⁹ Ministry of Justice. (2018). Supporting data tables: Female Offender Strategy, London: MoJ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy> (accessed 12 September 2021)
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- ⁴¹ Ministry of Justice. (2018). Female Offender Strategy. London: MoJ Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719819/female-offender-strategy.pdf (accessed 3 September 2021)
- ⁴² Baroness Corston. (2007). *A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System* London: The Home Office.

The proportion of the women's prison population who are serving indeterminate sentences declined overall from 6% to 4% between 1991 and 2005, before nearly doubling from 6% to 10% between 2005 and 2013.

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 is the first in a series of 'Invisible Women' briefings and it will form an ongoing area of work within the Building Futures programme. We believe the quotes from the women themselves help to illustrate the issues they have faced, demonstrating why this focus is important and necessary.

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