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# **Women, History, Invisibility and Prisons**

## **A contribution to the Women's History Month**

<https://thebscblog.wordpress.com/2020/03/10/women-history-invisibility-and-prisons/>

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Bio: Susanna Menis is a Lecturer in Law at Birkbeck London University, School of Law. Her recent book provides a revisionist prison history which brings to the forefront the relationship between gender and policy. It examines women's prisons in England since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Meta-description: Historical records evidence that the development of female prisons is closely related to the development of male prisons; however, denying a history of female prisoners in its own right fosters a stagnation in the discipline.

Historical criminology research on prisons in England comes across as genderless. Yet, these histories reflect the story of male prisons (Naffine, 1997) – not least because, there have been many historical records to draw upon. When we say the ‘invisibility’ of female prisoners, it is meant to suggest that the experiences and needs of women have been ignored. Many have argued that prisons are ‘a man’s world; made for men, by men’, and as a consequence, women have been subjected to regimes designed to deal with the needs faced by the larger prison population, that of men (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012; Priestley, 1999; Heidensohn, 1985). When attempts are made to examine the history of female prisons, because, as put by Zedner (1994:100) ‘to suggest that they [women prisoners] were simply “not foreseen” is patently implausible’ – requests are made for comparative analysis (Garland, 1993; Wiener, 1993). It is this sort of intellectual chastisement that has fostered the reproduction of theoretical frameworks shaped upon ‘a masculinist vision of the past’ (Spongberg, 2002:3).

The historiography of women in prisons in England is small (e.g. Smith, 1962; Heidensohn, 1985; Dobash et al., 1986). These (hi)stories however, have used at face value traditional and/or revisionist prison historiography to contextualise the history of female prisons. Hence, failing to reclaim women’s subjectivity to a great extent (with the exception of Zedner, 1994). Instead, historical primary sources evidence that despite their small numbers in comparison to men, penal policy was as concerned, proportionally, with female prisoners as it was with the male prisoner (Menis, 2020).

The discourse of the invisibility of female prisoners has lots to do with the taking at face value, the (hi)stories told about the separate and the silent systems. These were prison regimes [imported from America](#) in the 1840s because they were financially convenient, requiring minimal contact with the prisoner. They were adopted inconsistently and interchangeably, initially, in the three national penitentiaries: [Pentonville, Millbank and Brixton](#) (Menis, 2020). We know lots about these regimes, because volumes have been written on them. However, what is missing from such narratives is that the few women sentenced to the national penitentiaries were subjected to a specific female-version of the regime; also, the majority of women, because of the nature of their offence, were sent to local prisons, where the two American prison regimes were applied unsystematically.

Social reformers such as [Mary Carpenter](#), clearly acknowledged the importance of having in female prisons a different penal regime than in male prisons because 'there is a very great difference between the inmates' (1864:207). Partly, this was informed by the understanding that imprisonment for women was recognised as a hindrance to social integration and the regaining of respectability for work and marriage purposes. Indeed, female convicts were transferred, towards the end of their sentences, to [Fulham Refuge](#). This was aimed at 'erasing the considerable stigma of being recognised as a female ex-convict' (Zedner, 1991:171). As explained by Fulham Refuge's governor, they hoped that people who might be intimidated by the idea of employing female ex-prisoners could 'be induced to take them from a benevolent institution such as a refuge' (Revd J.H. Moran (1854), quoted in Zedner, 1991:182). Also [Du Cane](#) (1885:170) considered that 'these "refuges" were not prisons either in appearance or in discipline—they were homes and intended to afford the advantages of a treatment approaching in its characteristics to that of

home influence'. However, from 1888 Fulham was reinstated as a 'prison', and for the next eight years female convicts were accommodated only in Woking prison; from 1896 it was only Aylesbury prison housing the small numbers of female convicts: on an average day in 1897, 202 women were recorded as present, having the yearly average reception standing at less than 50 (*Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and Directors of Convict Prisons for the year 1896-1897*, 1897:10, 43).

Most women, however, were sent to the 65 local prisons around the country. The second [Prison Commission](#) report for 1879 and Susan Fletcher's memoir (1884) provide a valuable insight into the regime applied in these local prisons. By the end of 31 March 1879, only 63 prisons also housed women, and only Westminster gaol was a female-only prison. These prisons could have had a daily average population of as few as one woman (e.g. Southwell) and as many as 500 women at one time (e.g. Westminster and Liverpool). The Report tells us that only Lancaster gaol employed women in gum breaking and cotton picking; otherwise, policy informed by (as we identify it now) stereotypical understanding of femininity and womanhood, meant that female prisoners were subject predominantly to employment in housekeeping. Susan confirms that also later in the century, the 'hard labour' she was sentenced to was 'rather a myth'; as far as she was concerned, she 'did a little knitting' because she liked it, 'but not an hour's hard labour during the twelve months' (1884:337).

Historical records evidence that the development of female prisons is closely related to the development of male prisons (Menis, 2020); however, denying a history of female prisoners in its own right fosters a stagnation in the discipline. The uncritical assertion of women's 'invisibility' has led researchers to neglect the contribution of

policy specifically concerning the female prison population in the shaping of mainstream prison policy. However, let us not confuse 'bad' with 'different'; prison regimes have left much to be desired for, whether you were (are) a man or a woman. When first arriving to Westminster gaol, Susan Fletcher was faced with the 'filthy horrors of the reception'. She describes in her memoir how 'all wash from one tank, and wipe on one towel, and the poor women, wild with grief, or crazy with delirium-tremens, are screaming in the reception-cells'. Despite still being served bacon and beans during her stay (in 1879 the Prison Commission requested for these items to be removed), Susan thought that the food was not nutritious; her ring, which 'fitted so tightly' when she had just arrived to prison 'came off very easily' after only a week in custody. While waiting to progress to a position of trust (e.g. work in the kitchen and laundry), Susan had to spend 23 hours of the day in her cell. In that regard, she said (1884:320-1, 329):

A saint might grow more saintly by such a discipline, perhaps; but even a saint's body could hardly get more healthy. Common men and women, social beings, with all their best instincts unsatisfied and blighted, must be made worse in every way by such unnatural conditions.

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