

The Annual Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture 2015

Dr Gemma Simmonds CJ

Tuesday 17th November

Metropolitan Cathedral Church of St George, Amigo Hall

My career in prison chaplaincy began over twenty years ago following a random meeting in Rio de Janeiro with Ronnie Biggs. That in itself is a story worth hearing, but probably not for today. I took up voluntary work in the education department at Holloway Prison on my return from Brazil, and the fallout from my encounter with the Great Train Robber led me by obscure paths to the chaplaincy. My reflections today are based on what I have learned both from the women whom I have accompanied in various ways as a chaplaincy volunteer, and from the wise and powerful ministries of the two Catholic chaplains under whom I have worked, Sisters Mary Galvin of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, and Kathleen Diamond of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

Baroness Helena Kennedy, in her landmark study of women in prison, famously wrote that *Eve Was Framed*.¹ I don't believe it precisely true that the prisoners to whom I have ministered were framed, but over the years, both through personal experience and by studying the work of organizations such as the Fawcett Society, Women in Prison, Eaves and the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, I have come to believe that many of them should never have been in prison, and that their imprisonment has often had more to do with the way in which society perceives socially or psychologically delinquent women than with crime *per se*. It also has to do with the relative value placed on women, especially poor women within society. Theological thinking and the use of biblical and other theological resources have historically permeated attitudes to women and to the sins of women, relative to those of men within our culture. Even now, with secularism rampant, and among organizations who deny any links with religious affiliation, the residual biases of that religious hinterland are still detectable. I have come to see how important considerations of gender are for an understanding of the dynamics of condemnation, punishment and forgiveness, in the light of experience but also based on the theology of sin and forgiveness and the spiritual path to repentance and

¹ Helena Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1992)

conversion of life mapped out in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. I hope to make sense of all of this amid an inevitable welter of statistics.

Chris Tchaikovsky, former prisoner and founder of *Women in Prison* wrote,

'Taking the most hurt people out of society and punishing them in order to teach them how to live within society is, at best, futile. Whatever else a prisoner knows, she knows everything there is to know about punishment because that is exactly what she has grown up with. Whether it is childhood sexual abuse, indifference, neglect; punishment is most familiar to her.'²

Baroness Corston, in her report of 2007, notes that many women within the criminal justice system have personal histories of trauma, poverty and crisis. Echoing a previous report by Baroness Scotland she cites as dominant factors within their circumstances: domestic violence, child-care issues and being a single parent. When these issues are combined with mental illness, including eating disorders, with low self-esteem and substance misuse together with poverty, under-employment and social isolation they frequently result in behaviour that lands women in prison. Corston argues for a woman-centred approach both to offenders and those at risk of offending and an extension of all the networks that work in support of women.³

It could strongly be argued that the Catholic church is or should be such a network. The existence of organizations such as the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT), RENATE or Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation and the National Board of Catholic Women makes clear the commitment of individual Catholics and groups of Catholics to working in support of women within church and society. There is a body of modern and not so modern theology which clearly implies that patriarchy and chauvinism are both sinful and damaging to men as much as to women. In his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II states, 'When we read in the biblical description the words addressed to the woman: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16), we discover a break and a constant threat precisely in regard to this "unity of the two" which corresponds to the dignity of the image and likeness of God in both of them. But this threat is more serious for the woman, since domination takes the place of "being a sincere gift" and therefore living "for" the other [...] This "domination" [...] is especially to the disadvantage of the woman [...] While the

² <http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/about/our-history.php>

³ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf>

violation of this equality, which is both a gift and a right deriving from God the Creator, involves an element to the disadvantage of the woman, at the same time it also diminishes the true dignity of the man'.⁴

Yet we come from a scriptural background in which women were punished far more harshly for adultery and prostitution than men, and where women's experience, perception and voice was relentlessly silenced because they were scapegoated for the sins of the world. I quote from the infamous passage in the first letter to Timothy,

'I am not giving permission for a woman to teach or to tell a man what to do. A woman ought not to speak, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by childbearing, provided she lives a modest life and is constant in faith and love and holiness'. (1 Tim.2:11-15)

The Millennium Development Goals agreed to by the United Nations in 2000 contain a commitment to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment throughout the world. In many countries, including our own, even where the law prohibits it, women's rights continue to go unfulfilled. Women's disadvantage is based on their subordinate status in relation to men as decision-makers and power-holders. In many contexts women's voices and choices are silenced by the assumption that male needs and preferences are the norm, so that the way women experience the world, and their desires and choices are ignored, their ability to assert or exercise their rights restricted. Women may be denied educational opportunities, access to public services, political representation and rights in work and in law. Their claim to land or financial independence may be disputed by authoritative men within or outside their household. Women who have been victims of violence often encounter a judicial system which is effectively more sympathetic to the perpetrator than the victim.

Although it is frequently ignored by the world's legislators, it has long been part of Catholic social teaching, as well as of secular ethics, that there is a critical link between human rights, the eradication of poverty and sustainable development. The Millennium Goals echo implicitly the church's recognition of the importance played by women's rights in achieving poverty reduction, conflict prevention, economic growth and environmental protection. But gender

⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10

biases and the exclusion of women in public affairs often follow unconscious cultural patterns within secular legislation and even, dare I say it, within the church. When silent women find their voice, it not only makes for better social equality, but for a richer experience of human society.⁵

The biblical figure of Mary Magdalene is the icon of the repentant woman. But even there, the myth surrounding her is far from the reality, and this myth about female archetypes has largely carried over into the secular sphere. Contrary to popular opinion, Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute or a 'fallen woman'. She had seven demons cast out of her, but if we are to go by the modern analysis of other Gospel stories, this was more likely to be a case of physical or mental illness than demonic possession.

Baroness Corston points firmly in her report to the marginalization of women in a system designed largely for men which fails to recognize in its structures the fact that the biological difference between men and women has different social and personal consequences. Most women do not commit crime. Women with histories of violence and abuse are over-represented in the criminal justice system and could justifiably be described as victims as well as offenders. Proportionately more women than men are remanded in custody at massive cost to the tax payer. Women commit more acquisitive crime and have a lower involvement in serious violence, criminal damage and professional crime than men, and their pathway into criminal activity frequently involves relationship problems, including coercion by men. Drug addiction plays a huge part in all offending and this is disproportionately the case with women. At the same time mental health problems are far more prevalent within the female than within the male prison population or in the general population. While outside prison men are more likely to commit suicide than women, in prison the reverse is true, with self-harm in prison a huge problem among women detainees. As those of you involved in PACT will know only too well, women prisoners are far more likely than men to be primary carers of young children and this factor weighs heavily on their mental health while in prison, where, because of the small number of women's prisons and their geographical location, women tend to be located further from their homes than male prisoners, to the detriment of maintaining families, receiving visits and resettlement back into the community. 30% of women in prison lose their accommodation while in prison, while many more women than men suffer the permanent breakdown of their significant relationships while inside.

⁵ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkad.shtml>

Few women prisoners are dangerous, but their chaotic lifestyles and poor life skills lead to their incarceration. Corston states with considerable vigour,

‘Women must never be sent to prison for their own good, to teach them a lesson, for their own safety or to access services such as detoxification’,

and yet we know that these are often the reasons behind the detention of women. Women in custody are more than five times likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population, with 30% having had a psychiatric admission before coming to prison, and 37% having previously attempted suicide. This can be compounded in the long term by the shame and stigma that many women feel by a number of life experiences, not just being convicted of an offence but also mental illness or being a single parent or working within the sex industry. Perceptions of being judged as a social or moral failure only serve to reinforce their disadvantage, isolation and social exclusion.

The background to many women’s imprisonment is domestic or intimate violence. Up to half of women in prison report having experienced violence at home compared with a quarter of men. One in three women in prison have suffered sexual abuse compared with just under one in ten men. One in 20 women in the population at large are reported as having been raped at least once since the age of 16. The proportion of women prisoners may be considerably higher. This may account for why around 70% of women coming into custody require clinical detoxification compared with 50% of men. The drugs enable them to cope with the catastrophic feelings that such experiences generate.

It also may account for the high level of self-harming among women prisoners. According to a study published in the *Lancet* in December 2014, a quarter of female prisoners self-harm, and 102 female inmates self-harmed more than 100 times in one year. Women make up 5% of the UK’s prison population but account for 28% of self-harm cases.⁶ A study from Oxford indicates the effects on women, in terms of depression and self-injury, of frequent strip-searches. While anyone who has worked in Britain’s prisons knows that where there is a will there is a way to hide and traffic drugs, and that random searches are necessary, the fact that many of these women have previous histories of rape and sexual abuse should be taken into account when applying this as a regular method of controlling illegal substances.⁷ Similar

⁶ See [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)62118-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)62118-2/fulltext)

⁷ Emma Plugge, Nicola Douglas and Ray Fitzpatrick, *The Health of Women in Prison Study Findings*, (Department of Public Health, University of Oxford, 2006), see

reports of repeat traumatizing of already abused women come from the immigration detention sector, where women who have experienced sexual violence and torture find themselves further tormented by the incomprehension and insensitivity of asylum policies.

Repeated reports make clear that prison is not working for women. Clearly there are some who are a danger to the public and who have to be restrained for the protection of society at large. But these are very few. In response to the idea of imprisoning women for their own good, the statistics are not encouraging. 51% of women leaving prison will be reconvicted within a year, and among those on short sentences of less than 12 months, this rises to 62%. Given that roughly a quarter of female inmates have no previous conviction, sending a woman to prison increases rather than decreases the probability of her offending again.

Keeping women in prison is not saving the state money either. Vicky Pryce, in her 2013 book *Prisonomics*, increasing the provision of community sentences for women would save the Ministry of Justice money. Imprisoned for two months for accepting penalty points in place of her ex-husband, the former Liberal Democrat cabinet minister Chris Huhne, she calculates that in 2009/2010 keeping a woman in prison for one year cost £56,415 while an equivalent community sentence cost just £1,360. If a woman's children are placed in care, this increases the cost of a prison sentence from an extra £40,000 to place a child with no specialist needs in care for 14 months, to £525,000 over 20 months for placing a child with complex needs in care. She estimates that moving just 1,000 women out of prison and on to a community sentence would save the Ministry of Justice at least £12m a year. The ex-prisoner agrees with Baroness Corston that community solutions for non-violent women offenders, designed to take account of women's particular vulnerabilities and domestic and childcare commitments should be the norm.⁸

My own introduction to prison ministry largely came about because of a facility with foreign languages, especially Spanish and Portuguese, to deal with the many Hispanic drug mules in prison. Many of them are not themselves drug users and their crimes were often committed in ignorance of the likely penalties and solely to support their families. One Brazilian woman whom I got to know well was a former nurse, now suffering from full-blown AIDS. At a time when anti-retroviral drugs were not available for free, she brought a package of drugs into the

http://birthcompanions.net/media/Public/Resources/Extpublications/Health_of_Women_in_Prison_Study.pdf

⁸ Vicky Pryce, *Prisonomics: Behind Bars in Britain's Failing Prisons*, (London, Biteback Publishing 2013)

country in the hope of earning enough money to stay alive for three years so that her eleven year old son would be old enough to look after his blind grandmother. In no way do I condone the drugs trade, having had too much direct experience of its consequences when living as a missionary in Brazil myself. But I learned that sometimes honesty is a luxury that only the rich and secure can afford.

The desire to punish remains a significant part of our prison policy. In 2011, almost 300,000 women were sentenced by the courts. In February 2013 there were nearly 4,000 women in prison, the vast majority of whom having committed non-violent offences, the most common of which is shoplifting, receiving sentences of six months or under. Punishment is a common motif in many women's lives before they come into contact with the criminal justice system. Over half of the women in prison report experiences of emotional, physical or sexual abuse as children and the same number report having experienced domestic violence, though these statistics are notoriously underreported and therefore underestimated. Criminal justice responses reinforce women's experiences of powerlessness, causing further harm. Women are subject to more punishment once they are in prison with higher rates of disciplinary proceedings against them than men, leading the Ministry of Justice to conclude that 'women may be less able (due for example to mental health issues) to conform to prison rules'.⁹ Police statistics regularly point to a significant amount of violence against women within our society. But there is hidden harm that never features in these statistics. Some incidents are not recognised as violence, even by those on the receiving end, while others do not fit a formal crime classification. Karen Ingala Smith's Counting Dead Women website estimates that 150 UK Women were suspected to have been killed by men in 2014 and the statistic for this year stands at one woman killed every three days.¹⁰ The actual number of women in the UK who experience violence in a year has been estimated at near three million, making violence more prevalent for women than stroke, diabetes and heart disease.¹¹

I'm not parading these statistics simply in order to depress my audience or to denounce the prison system wholesale. In my twenty-four years as a prison chaplaincy volunteer I have seen many good and dedicated prison staff trying their best to make the best of a bad system. But

⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/women-and-the-criminal-justice-system>

¹⁰ See <http://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women/2015-2/>

¹¹ <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/resources>

I believe that much better care for many of the women we do imprison and clearer analysis of the causes and possible cures of their delinquent behaviour is available in non-statutory women's and prisoners' organisations. The most effective way to find genuine and lasting means of protection for women with violent partners is to re-divert resources from an inadequate, antiquated and over-burdened criminal justice system into adequate and reliable sources of funding for women's services. It is time that we stopped putting cost effectiveness at the top of our list of values and put women and their real needs first.

What help, then, can we offer to women in prison, and how can this help also do justice to those who have been injured by the crimes they commit? The Sycamore Tree programme for restorative justice is rightly famous. Here, too, the question of gender is interesting. Sheffield Hallam University's study of it shows that both before engaging in the programme and after it, women outnumber men in their perception of the fact that they currently have problems which need addressing, and after the programme female participants score higher in this perception than the pre-programme score for male offenders. This suggests that for female participants the level of problems that they perceive and in reality face is greater than that for male prisoners. In other words, even though a reduction in perception of problems is evident across gender, women have a greater perception of having significant problems after the programme than men did before it. This finding supports previous research which points to the prevalence of problems for female offenders which might lead to criminal behaviour and subsequent imprisonment, such as mental health as well as the acute stress occasioned, once imprisoned, by childcare issues. Prior to embarking on the programme male participants score higher than women in terms of regard for their victims, although on completion of the programme, both genders report an increase in their regard. Most significantly, however, the extent to which the prisoners 'anticipate' committing future offences decreases as a result of completing the Sycamore Tree programme. This means that the programme gives them hope of avoiding offending behaviour in the future, but here men score higher than women. Perhaps the women know that without support, the substance abuse or mental health issues which figured so dominantly in their original imprisonment will not be sufficiently addressed for them to have realistic hope of not offending again. If there are no reliable and easily accessible support programmes in place, what genuine hope do they have?¹²

¹² See Simon Feasey and Patrick Williams, *An Evaluation of the Sycamore Tree Programme - Based on an Analysis of Crime Pics II Data*, Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA), <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/7063>

How are we to work for forgiveness among the women prisoners of Britain today, especially in the forthcoming Year of Mercy? First of all, I suggest, by understanding what forgiveness is, and learning how gender also affects the dynamics of forgiveness both internally and externally for women. Many people are of the opinion that forgiveness is a matter of convincing oneself that 'the past is the past' - a wrong or injury done one doesn't really matter, or has been 'got over' in some way so that 'forgiven is forgotten'. But deep wrongs are unforgettable. Those who suffer them and those who perpetrate them bear the scars forever. The mystery of Christian forgiveness is precisely that – a mystery, held in God's power and not in ours. It is therefore a gift and a grace that can be prayed for but can never be presumed upon. I remember hearing a talk on forgiveness given some years ago by psychologist Sister Brenda Dolphin of the Sisters of Mercy.¹³ She recounted how, in one of her religious communities, there was an Irish sister with a great reputation for being forgiving. Whenever someone did something wrong and apologized, her stock response was, 'You didn't mean it!' Sr. Brenda pointed out that this was not, in fact, forgiveness. It was finding an excuse for someone's bad behaviour. This is a human attribute and, if caught on a good day, most of us can manage that, whether dealing with someone else's behaviour or of our own. But what of behaviour that is inexcusable? What of evil so gross that no amount of psychologizing or contextualizing can in any way explain it: the murder of a child, participation in torture, terrorism or genocide and the like? How are we to explain this to ourselves, and how on earth are we ever to forgive it? How does someone caught up in such situations ever come to terms with it, either as victim or as perpetrator?

I believe that it cannot be done without divine help, and that is why Jesus tells us to ask for the grace of forgiveness, both for ourselves and for our enemies, every day in the prayer that he taught us. The world's great religions invoke the God of mercy and compassion as a matter of daily routine, not because it's a matter of banal, trivial routine but precisely because we couldn't get through a day without such grace. My experience with the women in Holloway is that some need help to acknowledge that they need to seek forgiveness, both from God and from their victims, but many more need help to know how to forgive themselves. Statistics show that in male prisons, most of the violence is oriented outwards, towards wardens and fellow inmates. In female prisons most of the violence is oriented inwards, towards the women

¹³ http://www.mercyworld.org/news_centre/view_article.cfm?loadref=1&id=431

themselves. The self-loathing and self-rejection that is prevalent among many women, both inside and outside the prison system can find relief only in self-harming and self-punishment.

Rightly it is important for us to teach social responsibility to prisoners and to ensure that they take serious note of the damage that criminal behaviour, whether towards persons or property, can do to those who are on the receiving end of it. But facing people with the just consequences of their actions is not the same as punishing those who are already severely damaged. Doing so does little to ensure that they will not re-offend since there is little alternative for them without adequate support. This year saw the closure through lack of sufficient funding of Eaves, a major support organization that has been of invaluable help to women prisoners. Yvonne Roberts, chair of trustees at Women in Prison lamented their disappearance, noting that, 'The harms women face are widespread yet consistently ignored. Women facing criminalisation and gender based violence are repeatedly failed by society'. For her Eaves had been 'a powerful model of the kind of support to which vulnerable women respond best', since while, 'many criminal justice interventions and support services serve to replicate and reinforce unequal gender relations rather than tackle the root causes of harm [vulnerable women] have assets and capabilities that mean they can turn their lives around, and those of their children, given the right kind of help, at times when it matters most.¹⁴

This year also sees the beginning of the Year of Mercy. We need to think what we, as Catholic Christians, can do to extend God's mercy and forgiveness to those most in need of it and by doing this to help women prisoners to get out and stay out of the criminal justice system. I leave the last words of hope to Pope Francis. In a homily speaking of the woman who was a sinner and bathed Jesus' feet with her tears he says,

'This woman's every gesture [...] expresses her desire to have an unshakeable certainty in her life: that of being forgiven'.¹⁵

Vulnerable and chaotic women facing criminalisation are repeatedly being failed by society and by its criminal justice system. We don't need more punishment, more prisons or more cuts to essential services. We need to preach the good news of God's mercy. Part of this will be through

¹⁴ <http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/news-and-campaigns.php?s=2015-10-30-eaves-closure>

¹⁵ http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/13/pope_franis_homily_with_announcement_of_year_of_mercy/1129218



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securing more effective social interventions to tackle their problems at root. Only then will we stop Eve being framed.



Speaker's Biography:

Gemma Simmonds is a sister of the Congregation of Jesus. After a career in teaching she worked as chaplain in the University of Cambridge and at Heythrop College, where she also co-ordinated student support services. Since her return from study and work among women and street children in Brazil in 1992 she has been a volunteer on the chaplaincy team in Holloway Prison. She has worked in spiritual direction as a teacher and retreat-giver after training in the Jesuit Centre for Spiritual Growth, Wernersville, USA, and has been involved in religious

and priestly formation internationally since 1993. Her work as a conference facilitator and simultaneous translator has also led her into translating theological works in French, Spanish and Portuguese. She is Director of the Religious Life Institute, Co-ordinator of the Erasmus Exchange Programme and President of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.



The Annual Sir Harold Hood Memorial Lecture is organised by Pact – Prison Advice & Care Trust. Established in 1898 as the Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society we have been serving the families of prisoners, ex-offenders, and prisoners across England & Wales. We believe in the innate dignity and infinite worth of every human being and we believe in the possibility of their rehabilitation and redemption, no matter who they are, or what they have done. For further information about the work of Pact please visit www.prisonadvice.org.uk



The late Sir Harold Hood was formerly Vice-President of Pact. He was an example to many through his commitment to supporting the rehabilitation of prisoners. Sir Harold inspired and helped many people during his life through his faith, wisdom and encouragement. He would regularly go to Wormwood Scrubs chapel to share in the Mass with prison inmates. He was the embodiment of faith in action. His dedication to our charity's work, and his personal concern for the welfare of prisoners and their families, was outstanding.

Since the inaugural lecture in 2011 the speakers have been: Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, Bishop Richard Moth, Lucia Do Rosario-Neil, and Dr Gemma Simmonds CJ.

The topics the lectures address find their inspiration in Catholic Social Teaching.