

Reflecting history: Geese, On The Inside

Workshops to create a piece of theatre of testimony, led by Geese and Helena Enright, at HMP Peterborough, bringing together Dr Rachel Bennett's historic research on motherhood in prison with Geese's 30 years of experience facilitating interactive theatre within the criminal justice system as part of the rehabilitation process.

Background to the piece by Dr Rachel Bennett

When we think back to the fortress-like prisons created in the mid-19th century we often conjure up images of high walls and regimes of strict regulation intended to control people in body and mind. What is less easy to imagine is mothers and babies in this space.

My research explores women's historic experiences of health in prison, in particular their experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering in these settings between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century. It examines how the distinct health needs of this group of prisoners were identified and provided for in physical spaces and as part

of often obdurate regimes neither designed nor administered with their containment in mind. For example, it questions the impact of the system of separate confinement upon pregnant women who, along with their fellow prisoners, were locked in relative isolation for hours at a time. Our work on *Disorder Contained* showed the sheer psychological impact that this could have, but for pregnant women it deepened their level of anxiety because although they could call out to officers for help it was often the case that this wouldn't be responded to in time which led to women suffering miscarriages and giving birth alone in their cells with no medical assistance or support at all. An ex-prisoner described the practice of confining pregnant women in this way aptly as 'a refinement of cruelty that one could only ascribe to a lack of imagination on the part of those who are responsible for it'.

My research also illuminates the shifting but enduring debates about whether mothers and babies should be in prison at all and whether a prison sentence was an interruption to motherhood or an opportunity for medical and educational intervention, especially for women who lived in poverty and had limited access to medical care or welfare services in their community. This question has perennially troubled the criminal justice system and remains unanswered today. Early reform organisations argued that pregnant women should be removed to outside hospitals, initially to obviate the stigma of being born in prison but over time the debate shifted and

became more medicalised. There has also been increasing emphasis placed upon the question of the rights of the child, separate from their mother, and studies carried out on the impact of parental, particularly maternal, imprisonment on children who enter the prison with their mother or are left behind on the outside.

It was the case historically, and remains the case today, that entitlement to health on the part of mothers and babies poses difficult and complex questions and more definitive and consistent guidance on the availability and accessibility of medical care, and women's ability to be mothers in prison, remains something which organisations such as Birth Companions are campaigning for.

It is these themes and questions surrounding the reconciliation of a woman's identity as a mother with her status as a prisoner and the medical, legal, social and ideological implications of this that underpin and inspire the work we've been doing with Geese and the women in Peterborough.

Our project combines history with Arts practice and lived experience. As part of its creation we took the archival materials and testimonies from the past uncovered in our research into HMP Peterborough and we asked the women to respond to them and to pick out themes and stories that resonated with them. We found that working in this way facilitated an open dialogue in which we reflected upon the historical context of many of the issues the women identified as still facing mothers in prison today. The outcomes of these workshops combined with the historical materials and the interviews carried out by Liz and Helena underpin *Playing the Game*, a piece of theatre of testimony written by Helena, which will have its first full performance at the BEDLAM Festival in Birmingham in October 2019. Crucially the piece seeks to offer a creative way of not only understanding this subject's complex past

but we hope also offers a fresh voice to the ongoing discussion about where it goes in the future.

In conversation with Dr Rachel Bennett, Liz Brown (Geese), Dr Helena Enright (playwright), Naomi Delap (Birth Companions), Lucy Baldwin (De Montfort University)

We commissioned Geese, working with playwright Helena Enright, to produce a script developed by working with women in HMP Peterborough and its Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) using Dr Rachel Bennett's research on maternity in prison. Geese have 30 years' experience in doing this kind of work in criminal justice settings, and Helena is particularly experienced in working with theatre of testimony.

Liz Brown explained why they took the commission, 'It presented an opportunity for imprisoned women to influence policy and change it using their voice; it's not for us to speak for them, it's for us to listen and put down what it is that they are saying whether we agree or not - that's their experience. We wanted to hear their voice, their experience, their lived experience of being a mother in prison. And that's the importance of this piece of work.'

How did Geese and the women feel about using historical resource material? Liz explained, 'The prison project asked us what sort of materials we thought the women might be interested in, which is how Geese as a company works - we try to explore what is of interest to the people that we're working with. We often look at where they're at, where they want to be, and what are those things that are in between. So, specifically being able to look at the past even though it wasn't their past was really interesting because it was introducing them almost to another world of prison even though they are living in prison themselves. Once the workshops started then we could talk about what the conditions are



Mothers with their children, exercising at Tothill Fields Prison in the 1860s.
Image credit: John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera

like and have been like, because that's what they're talking about - what their conditions are like, what their diet is like, what choice they have in how they decide to be a mother, do they breastfeed or not?'

Helena Enright noted how one participant remarked that the size of the cell hasn't changed it's just got more modern furniture and Liz was shocked at some of the resonances and stark similarities to a century ago, 'We had dietary scales from 1907 that stated what food women were given if they were pregnant and it's literally the same, it's exactly the same. A piece of bread, some milk, a piece of fruit and some raisins. That hasn't changed.' There were some things that had changed, for example we shared photos of female prisoners in the 1950s walking with their babies in buggies and our group were amazed because they are not allowed to walk around with their children. (NB: nursery staff take the babies out in town in buggies, to the shops, to give them normal experiences.)

Helena added, 'My first draft of the play had no historical material and just gave the women a voice, so the historians could consider how the contemporary experiences resonated with the historical because that's

their expertise. We needed to work out how to include the historical material in a way that didn't overshadow the voice of the contemporary lived experience. We worked with six women, two that were actually on the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) at the time who both had their children in prison with them, one of whom who was going through a handout right in the middle of the project [her baby had reached 18 months and she was "handing her out" to her parents.]'

Helena mentioned this hugely emotional situation brought another challenge, 'When shaping the material for the script those two women's stories were huge, their narratives being particularly resonant with the research; but, because we had been working with other women who didn't have their children in prison with them when we went in to work with them, it was really important to get a balance in the script to ensure that all the women's voices are heard in as equal a way as the piece dramatically and theatrically allowed.'

To some extent, over time prisons did respond to the broader societal shifts in motherhood; for example, at the turn of the 20th century there's much national debate

about the war and national efficiency and the strength of future generations so there was an impetus to make mothers 'good' mothers. Prisons responded to this with courses trying to inculcate in women domesticity and motherhood, and by bringing in health visitors, doctors, and other people to try to educate women in prison to be 'good' mothers - in terms of broader society's idea of what that means.

Helena noted that the women on the MBU at Peterborough were allowed to make mothering decisions in some instances but not in others, 'They were allowed to cook for their children but because of health and safety they have to leave the child in the buggy at the door no matter what state that child is in while they cook because they are not allowed to bring them in their arms. In fact, they are not allowed to have their child in their arms as they move through the MBU, only in their room and in the bathroom. It's a really interesting paradox; they're encouraging you to be a mother in prison with your child but you really don't have any autonomy or agency in your own decisions over your child. It became very apparent to me that the MBU is there for the baby not the mother.'

One delegate at our conference told us of her lived experience in prison, 'The routine medical showed me to be pregnant. What is resonating with me from the research and the piece is the uncertainty - that doesn't seem to have changed over the period that you're looking at or in contemporary times. That not knowing. There doesn't seem to be a standard procedure for everyone so that everyone knows where they stand. I spent six months of my sentence thinking I might be there 10 years, thinking my mum was going to have to move out and live next to the prison and raise the baby. There were only a couple of MBUs, so not very many spaces, and all these different variables really caused me stress. It seems to have always been the case and I think it's quite depressing that there doesn't seem to be any resolution and that's because pregnant women shouldn't really be in prison in the first place so it's always going to be a problem.'

Liz Brown (Geese) and Helena Enright (playwright) read from the script generated by their project *On the Inside*, at *Healthy Inside* conference, December 2018. Image credit: Sam van Strien

At our conference, we were joined by a therapist who ran groups at Holloway's MBU for 20 years and is now elsewhere; she noted, 'I meet with the pregnant women and the mothers and babies each week and it's really difficult, it's emotionally difficult but also administratively very difficult. I'm not making any excuses for the prison but you have women coming in with very different concepts of mothering themselves. Trying to get mothers in the prison to breastfeed, or to go outside and use the garden... Women are entitled to have different views of motherhood but it's very very difficult... It's really very misleading to think it's the big bad prison and these idealised mothers...'

Some audiences noted the intrinsic dilemma of campaigning for good practice around mums and babies in prisons whilst really wanting to make the shift towards not having mums and babies in prison all. Rachel Bennett said, 'My research shows certain themes and rhetoric have shifted over time but others have simply endured. Why are the changes recommended time and again not being implemented?'

Lucy Baldwin says, 'Fundamentally, the prison system and estate is designed by men for men, and women have had to adapt around that. But it's also about getting the issues exposed - research on the men's estate seems to get coverage but where is the coverage of the research on the women's estate? It's allowed to stay on the backburner.'

Rachel Bennett continued, 'This is where we hope our public engagement work and the history might help to prompt conversations about what prison is actually for, what do we as a society want prisons to achieve? Then we might be able to move the debate forward in terms of mothers in prison. Some of the feedback that we got from *Lock Her Up's* audio piece *This is How It Was* by Sabrina Mahfouz, that explored mothers in prison,

was that this was a piece that people found very emotive and would say "I can't believe it, women in prison with babies". So I do think this is an area of change that the public would support.'

Naomi Delap pondered the dilemma, 'As an organisation [Birth Companions] specialising in this area, we do struggle with that dichotomy, of wanting to improve things in the here and now for women who are in prison, who are not getting the care that they need for themselves and their babies, or while they are pregnant or peri-natal, while at the same time arguing that they shouldn't be there, the majority of them, in the first place. While there is more public sympathy for that group of women, pregnant or with very young children, I don't think you can separate out that group from the larger population of women. What about those mothers who have children that are slightly older - don't they need their mother? I think it would be counter-productive just to say "Don't send pregnant women or very new mothers to prison" because it's part of a bigger piece of work; there's the risk that if you don't have babies in prison with their mother then authorities start to separate babies from their mother. And if you didn't sentence peri-natal women to prison what's the provision for them in the community?'

Liz believes we might be moving towards a more systemic shift in society's attitude, 'A lot of the women we spoke to talked about how their support needs before they ever get to prison are not being addressed but towards the end of this project there was an announcement that five new women's prisons were not going to be built and the £50m they were going to cost was going to be cut and become £5m to be put into a more supportive kind of hostel type residential premises for women. And that's the shift that has to take place, a more holistic approach.'

The Nursery, Holloway Prison.

Image credit: Howard League for Penal Reform, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick



"The idea of offending against femininity and against maternity is something the historians came across a good deal in the late 19th century"

Some people think there is evidence that women with children are more harshly punished by judges in some sort of double penalty because not only is a woman offending against the law, she is challenging the norms of femininity and maternity. The idea of offending against femininity and against maternity is something the historians came across a good deal in the late 19th century. They found it shocking that those ideas are still so current and influential.

Helena added, 'It came up with some of the women we worked with. One talked about how she had mental health issues, that was part of the reason for her going into prison, but she had been on remand for two years where she had been fulfilling all of her remand conditions - she had been attending support in the community, she had been going for therapy counselling, fulfilling it. She was 17 weeks pregnant on the day of sentencing, nobody thought she would actually get a prison sentence

because she had another year to do on the remand programme. She said she felt like the judge was punishing her because she had two boys outside, and it was very much "Well, you should have thought of that". Her barrister was in absolute shock that the judge had sentenced her to prison.'

Domestic violence is a factor in many women's cases said Helena, 'One of the mothers talked about how a smell can take her right back to 15 years ago when she was in an abusive relationship. These women, they are human beings they're not just prisoners. Through this project we hope to get people to recognise their humanity; we are all human and there before whatever grace go I.'