



IPRT Briefing on Women in Detention

"It is now accepted that a gender specific approach is required for women in prison"¹

The number of female prisoners in Irish prisons has increased dramatically in recent years. Women offenders generally present a lower risk to society, yet high numbers are being sent to prison for non-violent offences. In addition, prison policies can often overlook the gender-specific health and welfare needs of female prisoners. Ireland simply cannot afford the social and economic costs of sending increasing numbers of women to prison, when even a short period of imprisonment is demonstrated to have a profound negative impact on families and communities, particularly in breaking the relationship between mothers and their children.

Context

- In 2010, **1,701 women** were committed to prison in Ireland.² This figure represents over **12%** of the persons committed to prison in 2010.
- Between 2005 and 2010 there was an **87% increase** in the number of women committed to prison.³
- The average number of female offenders in custody on a daily basis was 132 in 2009⁴ compared with 124 in 2008. This represents a 6.5% increase.
- 82% of the women committed to prison under sentence in 2009 were imprisoned for non-violent offences.

Facilities

There are two female prisons in Ireland. Both prisons are medium-security; there are no open prisons or other community-based alternatives. When current building projects are completed, the national bed capacity for women prisoners will have almost doubled in less than 2 years.

- **Dóchas Centre:** On 20th June 2011 there were 129 women in the Dóchas Centre⁵, which was designed to hold 85. Regimes in the prison have been severely affected in recent years, which have seen overcrowding of up to 140% of capacity. 70 additional spaces in dorm-style accommodation will open by the end of 2011.
- **Limerick female prison:** On 20th June 2011, there were 35 female prisoners in Limerick female prison. The prison was found to be proportionately the most overcrowded prison in Ireland by the Inspector of Prisons in 2009. The prison has a bed capacity of 34, including doubling-up in 10 single cells.⁶ However, the Inspector maintains that "none of the cells are of sufficient size to accommodate two prisoners". Education facilities are shared with the male prison.

Key Issues

Mental Health: The prevalence of mental health issues is higher among women prisoners than their male counterparts. A 2005 study found that: 60% of sentenced female prisoners in Ireland had a lifetime history of mental illness; 5.4% should be diverted to hospital psychiatric services; and 32% of females committed to prison presented with mental health issues requiring psychiatric care.⁷ In 2009 the Dóchas Visiting Committee questioned whether "prisoners suffering serious

1 Office of the Inspector of Prisons (2011) *Standards for the Inspection of Prisons in Ireland – Women Prisoners' Supplement*.

2 Dept of Justice and Equality (2011) *Report of the Thornton Hall review Group*, p. 21.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Irish Prison Service (2010) *Annual Report 2009*, p. 17.

5 Dáil question on prisoner accommodation, 23rd June 2011, available at <http://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2011-06-23.1143.0>.

6 Office of the Inspector of Prisons (2010), *The Irish Prison Population: An examination of the duties and obligations owed to prisoners*, p. 59.

7 Kennedy, H, et al (2005) "Mental health in Irish prisoners: psychiatric morbidity in sentenced, remanded and newly committed prisoners" National Forensic Mental Health Service, Dublin.

mental health concerns can be adequately cared for in the Dóchas Centre.”⁸

Community-based Alternatives: There is a need for greater health and social care provision within community settings, which offers a more effective way of tackling the offending behaviour of many female prisoners. There is considerable scope for financial savings by diverting offenders away from prison, into holistic community support/treatment programmes.⁹ This would also lessen the damaging effects of parental imprisonment on children.

Contact with Children and Families: While most children continue to be cared for in their home when their father is imprisoned, only 5% of children continue to be cared for at home when their mother is sent to prison.¹⁰ The Inspector of Prisons has specifically acknowledged that contact between female prisoners and their children should be facilitated and encouraged.¹¹ The reality is that more than 75% of women prisoners are held in the Dóchas Centre, which means that maintaining meaningful family contact is difficult for those from outside Dublin.

Mothers and Babies: Under the Prison Rules, a child can be admitted to the prison to remain with the mother up to 12 months of age. The Inspector of Prisons has expressed concern regarding the absence of a mother and baby unit in female prisons, maintaining that it creates “serious child protection issues”.¹² While provision for a mother and baby unit is included in the current building programme at the Dóchas Centre, there are no plans to provide such facilities at Limerick female prison.

Health and Hygiene: Female prisons require a gender-specific framework for healthcare that pays special attention to the particular healthcare requirements of female prisoners. Both Irish female prisons have in-cell sanitation. However, the in-cell sanitation in Limerick is not screened off, and female prisoners have to attend to their sanitary and washing requirements within feet and in full view of their fellow prisoner.¹³

Post-Release Support: There is a need for greater support in the community for women post release. Some supported housing exists for women leaving the Dóchas Centre in the Dublin area, such as the Tus Nua project. By contrast, services at Limerick female prison are inadequate for addressing the needs of women prisoners, and there is a lack of access to information about the services available upon release.

Our Recommendations

- 1. The imprisonment of women must only be used as a last resort when all other alternatives are deemed unsuitable.**
- 2. The Government should commission an urgent review of sentencing practices, which see high numbers of women receive custodial sentences for less-serious and non-violent crimes.**
- 3. There should be a wider use of gender-specific alternatives to custody, along with provision of an open-prison type regime for women.**
- 4. Increased support services in the community would address the complex issues and multiple needs of many women offenders (including mental health issues and substance addictions) without breaking links with women’s families.**
- 5. Female prisoners with serious mental health issues should be diverted away from the prison system.**
- 6. Adequate facilities must be provided to ensure that the welfare of children born in custody is protected.**
- 7. Contact between female prisoners and their families, particularly their children, should be facilitated and encouraged.**
- 8. Special provision must be made for the gender-specific health and welfare requirements of female prisoners.**

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⁸ Department of Justice (2009) *Report of the Visiting Committee, Dóchas Centre to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform*.

⁹ See Revolving Door’s Agency, *Counting the Cost: The financial impact of supporting women with multiple needs in the criminal justice system*, 2011; Prison Reform Trust, *Reforming Women’s Justice, Final report of the Women’s Justice Taskforce*, 2011.

¹⁰ Cited in Jewkes, Y. (ed.) (2007) *Handbook on Prisons*, Devon: William Publishing; at p. 256.

¹¹ *Op. cit* no.1, p. 12.

¹² *Op. cit* no.1, p. 51.

¹³ *Op. cit* no.1, p. 8.