'It's all about the family.....'

Seema Patel, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University discusses the role that families can play in reducing offending.

Introduction

The disadvantages faced by women in the criminal justice system (CJS) are well noted. However, for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women, who are overrepresented in the women's prison population (Prison Reform Trust 2017), these disadvantages are compounded by intersections of race, gender, faith and immigration status.

In 2007, The Corston Report, regarded by many as ground-breaking for its clear analysis of women's offending and the complexity of their needs, stated that women from minority ethnic groups are "further disadvantaged by racial discrimination, stigma, isolation, cultural differences, language barriers and lack of employment skills," (Corston 2007: 27). In this article, I explore what we already know about women from minoritised ethnic groups and provide an overview of my research in this area.

Seema Patel

Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University

Role of Families

Since 2002 there has been an increased interest in the role that families can play in reducing offending, that strong family support during imprisonment can have a positive impact on outcomes post release, with a number of official reports concluding that families are the most effective resettlement agency (Codd 2008). More recently, the publication of the Farmer Review in 2017 highlighted the importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending, citing family relationships as 'the golden thread' to help reduce reoffending (MOJ 2017). A further report in June 2019 focused on the importance of strengthening women's familial and other relationships. Although this report made no specific recommendations for women from different ethnic and racial communities, there was acknowledgment that female prisoners from these communities face distinct and discrete difficulties (MOJ 2019).

When the Farmer Review was published, I started teaching a second-year module on families and households to Sociology, and Criminology and Sociology undergraduate students. I also attended a fantastic training day with NEPACS, titled 'Hidden Sentence', which focussed on the impact of imprisonment on families. As a result of this, I started wondering what the experience of family support might be like for Asian women in prison, what did families tell their extended family and the wider community about a relative in prison? Did they tell the truth, or avoid the conversation, or simply say they were overseas for an extended period of time. How did Asian women themselves manage their imprisonment? What was their family support experience like?, I was intrigued given my own awareness of 'what will the community say,' but also the role of 'shame' and 'honour' which are frequently associated with Asian women and used to control their behaviour so that they conform to socio-cultural norms and expectations (Mansoor 2017).

Within the narrative of strengthening prisoner family support since the publication of the Farmer Review in 2017, there has been an absence of discussion about what happens if there is no family support, or if family support is problematic or complex. The overwhelming tone has been that families are inherently good. However, following growing interest in the role families should play in reducing reoffending, Codd (2008) suggests that caution is needed when considering the role of families as an agency of resettlement. Not all families offer positive environments and there may be coercion, abuse, and manipulation (Codd 2008). This, then, necessitates accurate assessment of that family support.

In his most recent report Lord Farmer (MOJ 2019: 15) recommended that each prison should provide a physical space where women can spend private time with family members. It is important, therefore, that the necessary risk assessments take account of the potential of such spaces to be used in other ways than intended for Asian women prisoners and potentially other cohorts of female prisoners where family support may be problematic.

Why does Family Support Work?

This is a question that we actually know very little about.

Ditchfield (1994) found that for men, family ties can play a key role in preventing recidivism, but Codd (2008) argues that we don't actually know much about the precise nature of that relationship and explains that whilst we might have examples of 'what works', we know less about 'how' and 'why' processes of integration and resettlement work. In relation to female prisoners, very little is known about the role of family relationships here.

For women from some racial and ethnically minoritised groups, attitudes to offending within families and communities, arising from cultural or religious beliefs, may not always be supportive. In 2014 a report found that Muslim women in prison were often disowned by their families, or relationships were severely fractured due to shame, embarrassment, pride and dignity. Once released, women were often not able to return to their families for fear of rejection and criticism. Women were marginalised and labelled as bringing 'shame' and 'dishonour' to their family and community, even though it was often 'family' links which led to women becoming involved with the criminal justice system in the first place (Buncy and Ahmed 2014). A subsequent report published in 2019 by the same authors, this time focusing on community-based solutions for Muslim women post release, highlights the complex and multi layered intersections faced by this group of women, but also the "healthy and not so healthy relationships and expectations," of families (Buncy and Ahmed 2019: 22).

While the experiences of Asian women in prison are individual and diverse, very little is known about their experiences, there has been no academic research exploring family support for Asian women who are serving a prison sentence in England and Wales. There may well be instances where the experience of family support is entirely positive, but in other cases families might refuse to have contact due to the shame of imprisonment or impose conditions for returning to the family. We just don't know what this lived experience is.

The research I am currently undertaking will contribute to this important gap in knowledge. The broad aim of my research is to explore the experience of family support for Asian women both in prison and upon release, including the significance or otherwise of cultural concepts such as 'shame' and 'dishonour' to answer the following research questions:

- Is family support supportive and positive both within prison and upon release?
- Do cultural and religious factors impact on family support?
- How do Asian women cope with imprisonment/release from prison?
- Are alternative support mechanisms available/accessed in the absence of family support both within prison and upon release?

Drawing on semi structured interviews with staff and officers from voluntary and community organisations, HMPPS, and women across three prison sites, my research will provide an understanding of family support from the lived experience of Asian women prisoners, which may be distinct from other groups of female prisoners. This research creates the possibility for the findings to be used to improve and/or update training to prison and probation staff as well as support workers and other staff who have routine and frequent contact with Asian women prisoners. This will ensure that interventions are tailored to meet the specific needs of these women, rather than treating them as a homogenous group.

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