

Book Review: Barbara Owen, James Wells, and Joycelyn Pollock, *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women's Imprisonment*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780520288720 (Paperback). 260 Pages. \$29.95.

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When the United States embarked on a policy of mass incarceration during the waning decades of the twentieth century, few considered the impact that this correctional course change would have on women. Women offenders had been largely invisible or "forgotten" by a criminology that emerged to complement, explain, and occasionally critique state efforts to control and discipline unruly and dangerous men. In the classic texts on crime, women literally "disappeared" from data sets, from discussions of crime patterns, and most importantly for this discussion from life behind "bars." For centuries, very often, little or no thought was given to the possibility of a female prisoner until she appeared at the door of the institution (Rafter 1990). It was as though crime and punishment existed in a world in which gender equaled male, and women were correctional afterthoughts, at best.

Some of this intellectual and institutional neglect was understandable. For most of the last century, we imprisoned only about five to ten

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thousand women (Calahan 1986). In 1980, there were just over 12,000 women in U.S. state and federal prisons and they constituted only 3.9 percent of those in prisons. After decades of mass imprisonment, though, there are now over one hundred thousand women in U.S. prisons (111,495 in 2015), and these women accounted for 7.2 percent of those in prison (Carson and Anderson, 2016: 5). In four decades, the number of women being held in the nation's prisons increased nearly ten-fold and the women's imprisonment boom was born. What had started as a "war on drugs" quickly morphed into an unannounced and unplanned reshaping of the women's correctional landscape, and what some have dubbed a "war on women" (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, and Owen, 1994).

After this draconian policy shift, it is probably appropriate to take stock of the state of women's imprisonment in the United States. *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women's Imprisonment* by Barbara Owen, James Wells, and Joycelyn Pollock is a timely and sobering assessment of what mass imprisonment has meant for women behind bars in our country. One could hardly have asked for a better team to compile the assessment. Both Owen and Pollock are authors of highly respected books on the topic of women's imprisonment; Owen's *In the Mix* which is a classic ethnography of a woman's prison, and Pollock's classic *Women, Prison and Society* is a highly respected compendium of the history and current state of women's imprisonment. Wells brings to this group a wealth of first hand experience as a former correctional officer who has extensive experience assessing sexual safety in correctional facilities, and an impressive track record for obtaining external grants.

Importantly, the book relies on three federally funded studies on the nation's conditions of confinement, with a focus on sexual abuse and assault: an National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study that collected qualitative data from staff at twelve facilities housing men and women, a second NIJ study that examined "sexual violence" in women's prisons using 40 focus groups (with approximately 150 respondents) in four states, and finally an National Institute of Corrections (NIC) study that conducted a survey of "over 4000 women prisoners" held in fifteen "dispersed federal, state, county, and private correctional facilities" (15). They also, importantly, conducted a content analysis of fifty letters sent to the "Just Detention International" detailing women's experiences with sexual assault while imprisoned. Much of this research was funded by the only federal prison reform initiative of the era of mass incarceration era, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), which was passed

unanimously by both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and signed by President George W. Bush in 2003.

PREA provided the “framework” and funding for the studies undertaken by two of the three authors (Owen and Wells) as well as others. While all research on sexual misconduct in prisons is deeply challenging, the authors have taken the opportunity to cast a broad net in terms of their research questions (and methodologies) to focus on issues of prison safety, sexual misconduct, violence, and prison life so as to avoid some of the obvious pitfalls associated with this research.

Prisons, like all institutions, are affected by gender, and given their overwhelmingly male populations, they have historically been gendered male. In the early seventies, for example, about half the states and territories had no separate institutions for women inmates (Singer, 1973), and there were so few women in prison that the system was for all intents and purposes male (it was 97% male in 1970) (Calahan, 1986). As the authors note, women are held in a wide variety of jail and prison settings (even converted motels and mental hospitals in the early chaotic days of women’s mass incarceration), today they increasingly they are held in “male-influenced warehouse” prisons with an emphasis on punishment and punitive control in both the physical plant and operational practices.

Exactly how bad it is for women doing time in these sorts of facilities is laid bare by the detailed assessments *In Search of Safety* provides. Given the authors’ unique access as well as the extensiveness of their review, their assessment that “many prisons we visited were old, reflecting years of too many bodies confined in too small spaces” (47) is sobering indeed about the state of women’s prisons in the U.S.:

The physical plant of the contemporary prison is deteriorating. Women told us that vermin, mold, air temperature, water pressure, temperature in the showers, quality of food, and noise in the living units created threats to their well-being (47)

In such deteriorated settings, imprisoned women reported that “cleanliness and tidiness in increasingly crowded conditions of the contemporary prison were priorities for almost all” (56), and that these actually becomes safety issues, since women feel that failing to keep a room or cell neat is a form of “disrespect” (56). Closely linked to deteriorated physical conditions, and to tensions in crowded institutions, was a focus on “personal cleanliness and hygiene” (56). Women under lock and key report that staff typically “just don’t care” about women’s health which increases women’s fear of disease in these overcrowded

and unclean settings. Systematic lack of adequate, and gender responsive health care (prisons often use an outdated and ineffective systems of dispensing medical care like sick call) make imprisonment dangerous for all. Increasing the tension, women often report that institutional neglect of women's health issues meant that other women inmates often attempt to care for very sick fellow inmates, putting their own health in peril.

One of the most challenging issues for women who end up in jail or prison is that they are housed in institutions whose very subculture "facilitates 'hegemonic masculinity' by accentuating male dominance and violence (88). Prisoner "codes" like the admonition to "do your own time," to avoid, at all costs, being a "snitch," and being regarded as "tough" are all forms of exaggerated and accentuated masculinity in traditional male prisons. No surprise, then, that these institutions have had severe, and entrenched problems with male on male violence, including sexual violence, particularly violence fueled by gang violence and racial tensions. Importantly, prison rules and procedures assume this sort of "inmate" and have generated rules to align with imprisoning dangerous and physically violent men.

Owen, Wells, and Pollock did find a rich and gendered social terrain that women inmates attempt to construct in this masculinized physical and policy environment. They argue that women construct "gendered social worlds through rules and requirements for living in prison" (9). In this new cultural landscape, the authors contend, women bring various forms of what they dub as "prison capital" which includes "any type of resource, or access to a desired resource that can keep a woman safe while she does here time" (2). This includes "who you know," what you know, as well as access to economic capital, and cultural capital of "respect and reputation." Given the impoverished and marginalized neighborhoods from which these women are drawn, pulling all this "capital" together deftly can be incredibly challenging, but can and does produce, in some women sources of strength and resilience.

Women inmates, though, must create their prison neighborhoods or communities, as the authors describe them, in a "gender-neutral" set of standards and operational practices, which govern all forms of prison life. These assume, at best, that women are treated equally if they are treated as if they were male inmates; at worse, they actually can expose women to real victimization (think the absence of privacy in most prisons, even in the bathroom and shower areas) and issues surrounding strip searches. Moreover, prisons in the United States are about deprivation and scarcity, which means that they have to navigate a system where rife with "economic conflict," a subterranean economy,

and “illicit trafficking and trading” (3). Relationships with staff and other prisoners, so key to women’s mental health on the outside, are complicated by deprivation, and can involve “risk, conflict, and violence” (3).

The authors devote considerable energy and attention around the complex interpersonal dynamics among women with a focus on the ways that deprivation can set women against each other. Specifically, if inmates are indigent, this puts a strain on the whole group, and conversely, if inmates are known to have resources (and valued access to expensive canteen items), this can also put them at risk for “jacking.” (110). Finally, there are “debts” that women accumulate, particularly those that are addicted to drugs or even tobacco, which while illicit, exist in many prisons. Prison jobs pay extraordinarily low wages, but women are frequently not given all the hygiene items they actually need to survive in prison, so again scarcity provides a rich setting for possible conflict and even violence. That said, the authors note that unlike male prisons, actual violence in women’s prisons is usually restricted to minor scuffles, usually between two women. Not infrequently, these fights break out over “one sided breakups” or “jealousy” (128). While the focus in this book on the details regarding tensions among women is a very useful addition to the literature, one would wish that authors need to be bit more mindful about how much *less* violent women’s prisons are than their male counterparts (and they must have these data from their work, but it is not reported). In fact, the authors’ call, more broadly, to bury their quantitative data from their NIC survey in an appendix, seems puzzling, since these results are extremely interesting (and not that lengthy).

Rich information on staff inmate interactions and relationships is another earmark of *In Search of Safety*. Importantly, the authors stress that many women reported that staff routinely made “disrespectable comments” (142). Said one woman:

“I feel as they the staff here are very rude and disrespectful to inmates, but they expect us to treat them with respect. They talk down to us and yell at us. I don’t think its fair because if we talk to them a certain way, they don’t agree, and we get wrote up. And it s not right when the mission statement says, ‘We care about inmates’”(142).

This phenomenon has been reported in girls’ institutions, but the documented evidence of both sexist and racist epithets (“They can call

you anything—ho, bitch, black bitch”) (142) that the women experienced is disturbing.

Clearly, PREA was focuses on inappropriate sexual relationships (sexual assaults, actually) among staff and inmates (and some have argued that the prospect of male sexual abuse was one of the reasons the legislation passed so easily) (Sapien, 2014), and the authors seek to explore what they admit can be a complicated issue in “this world of constrained choice” (154). Particularly tricky, they admit are instances where “prisoners do initiate relationships with staff as an expression of agency or resistance or for romance or sex” (154). They also note that due to increased focus on this problem, particularly in women’s prisons, things have shifted some. Said one inmate, “Back in the day, they would come in your cell and forcibly take it [have sex]. But now, I don’t know, they have a little more finesse. They will threaten you to do stuff in your room. The cops are known to set women up with drugs and let them get caught. Let the woman go down for the count.” (161). Often women inmates, who have a background in prostitution, will see staff as “tricks” and engage in sexual exchanges to get other items they need (like a woman in the hole who traded oral sex for “cigarettes and food” (161). Complexity, though, does not negate the fact that international law defines staff sexual assault as torture, since it violates “the basic protections of human rights” (153).

The authors conclude their book with a plea to reconsider the U.S. policy of “overincarceration of women (and men)” (169). They also importantly document important, and long ignored United Nation’s initiatives in the area of imprisonment, as a way to support their contention that “the contemporary women’s prison as State-sponsored suffering that violates universal human rights” (175). The correctly note that prisons tend to be toxic for both inmates and staff (169), and that mass imprisonment as policy is “a political reaction to social problems grounded in inequality and disadvantage (175).

In conclusion, the book sidesteps the pitfalls that have beset the PREA data collection more broadly, with its peculiar focus on the sexual abuse perpetrated by female staff members (see Beck, Berzofsky, Caspar, and Krebs, 2013; Beck, 2015). The findings that “about half of all verified staff sexual misconduct is perpetrated by female staff members guarding male prisoners” (165) ignores male privilege (the vast majority of the female staff “rapes” “appeared to be willing” (89%) (Fields, 2014), flies in the face of international assessments of our correctional system (see Amnesty International, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1996), and ignores centuries of women’s imprisonment history, where the sexual assault of

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women prisoners became a defining aspect of women's experiences of prison (Chesney-Lind, 1986). Importantly, this work provides all concerned with women in prison with a sobering and grim assessment of the challenges we face as we seek to wean our country from its attachment to mass incarceration in a political climate that seems more willing than ever to embrace punishment and incarceration of not only men, but also women (and even their children).

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