

Transforming women's imprisonment in Aotearoa by proposing an open prison model

Newsletter 1, October 2021

Introduction – women in prison – about the project- Māori – Corrections declines to participate – next steps

Kia ora tatou

Pūkeko Research Ltd has received funding from the Borrin Foundation to investigate whether a women's open prison model would be effective in the Aotearoa context.

At this time when all imprisonment, and especially women's imprisonment, is up for review, we are keen to provide an alternative approach. All prisons in Aotearoa are built to high security specifications. Security trumps everything else. Barbed wire wraps around every prison in Aotearoa. The main role of employees is as guards, keyholders and security monitors, not as educators and rehabilitation experts.

Most women in prison (70%) are victims of violence and domestic abuse. They receive no help for that in prison. The various Prison Inspectorate reports of 2020 and 2021 have revealed some terrible practices. In a recent blog, I wrote the following description, summarising the Inspector's reports:

About half the prisoners were either in high security units or their units were "treated as" high security. Even the remand unit, where traumatised women are held for months and years before proceeding to trial. Think about that.

They do not always receive inductions into the prisons. They are held for up to 23 hours a day in their cells. The cells themselves often have poor ventilation, vents blocked with dust and lack of heating (cool rather than cold). For their one hour a day outside the cell, they often rush around making phone calls, washing clothes etc. Anyway, there are no proper outside recreation facilities because the prison design precludes access.

The food is quite nice but usually cold by the time it reaches high security, and many women are forced to eat the cold food in their cells. There are no curtains in many cells so prisoners have to shower in the dark for privacy purposes. Some women with mental health problems are terrified of this. The inspectors found that many beds had no bedding, which is blamed on the women who use the bedding as chains to communicate with others. Towels are also in short supply.

They are 18 TVs short in the high security unit, which is blamed on the women for damaging the TVs. The women are bored. There is no access to the library for most. They are locked in their rooms all day. There are recreation rooms which appear to be being used as storage facilities. There are no chairs in some cells and not enough in shared facilities.

The women often are not given enough bras and access to menstrual products is patchy. When they get to leave their cells, standover tactics, bullying and violence are often ignored or not managed by staff. Damaging and confrontational behaviour is not managed by staff. There are no pro-social programmes, no access to education and training programmes (but some access to work). There is “limited use of incentives”. SERT staff, dressed in their riot gear wander daily through the units to assess tension levels. They intervene at times:

Six guards were outside her door, dressed like they were going to war, with masks, shields and helmets to protect them from the fallout of what they were about to do.

There are a small number in segregation, who are not allowed to see or talk to others. Some have been there for more than 3 months. The report noted their plans were “unsuitable”. The high security staff in one unit, in particular, do not communicate with prisoners. Files are incomplete and complaints may go missing. Key information is not recorded. The administration of misconduct rules is not working.

The basis of this project is that transformational change is needed in how prisons operate in Aotearoa. In some cases this may mean new alternatives to prison. But in others, it may mean significant change in what a prison is and what it produces.

In [this introduction to the project](#), we provided an overview of what a women’s open prison looks like in the UK. What might a similar model look like within NZ conditions?

The project

Dr Catherine Love (Te Atiawa nui tonu, Taranaki, Ngati Ruanui, Nga Ruahinerangi) and Dr Liz Gordon are working together on the project. The first stage (to be completed by end of October 2021) is writing three brief overview papers:

1. Women prisoners – policy and statistical analysis
2. An overview of open prisons – strengths and issues
3. Review of literature on women prisoners

As each paper is completed, we will be sending it out to people (and putting it on the website) for views and consultation.

The second phase is interviews with stakeholders, culminating in a hui taumata. Currently there is a little uncertainty about how this will be achieved, due to the Covid situation.

The third phase is writing a policy paper for prison alternatives/ alternatives to prison as the final report.

Māori involvement

At the end of 2020 Māori were 69.8% of all women sentenced prisoners. Most of the small group already engaged in this project are wāhine Māori. We are keen to engage more of you!

The Department of Corrections won't participate: update

We applied some time ago to the Department of Corrections for permission to carry out research within their organisation – with staff and people in prison. We thought the organisation would be delighted to work with such an innovative project, but unfortunately, they have declined permission at this stage. We have asked them to review this position.

Our study starts from the Minister of Corrections' Cabinet paper unleashing five to fifteen years of reform, described in our policy paper as follows:

The 'Next Steps' Cabinet paper outlines a five-year plan to achieve “major improvement to the Corrections system, setting the platform for long-term transformation articulated in Hōkai Rangī”. These changes will address the high representation of Māori in the prison system, the need for a “more normalised” environment to improve connections to the community and whānau and significant improvement to rehabilitation and transition support for vulnerable people and their whānau.

If Corrections will not participate at all in projects such as this, we wonder how such transformational reform will be generated. Can they do it for themselves?

Corrections can prevent us talking with their staff and prisoners, but this does not mean that the project can't proceed. While we would very much prefer to work alongside them, we will do the work anyway.

Next steps

Our first paper should be ready in a few days (this is on policy and statistical overview). We will be sending this out for comment. The two further reports will follow relatively quickly. We will then start interviewing stakeholders.

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