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Imprisoned women and professional intervention in Spain

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Abstract

Women deprived of freedom present some profiles and specific problems that distinguish them from the male prison population. The aim of this investigation is to evaluate how these gender differences are presented in the different observations and practices of the professionals who are involved in prison establishments. This will be done by means of a qualitative study with the participation of 22 professionals who work in three Spanish detention centres: Zuera (Zaragoza), Ponent (Lleida) and Palma (Mallorca). The results of the analysis show two main professional positions: the discourse and praxis that is present in the question of gender and the position that reproduces the patriarchal cultural patterns. Among the proposals for improvement revision of notions and prison treatment plans for women that are more appropriate to their specific needs are necessary.

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1. Introduction

If going to prison is a traumatic event, in the case of women it is necessary to add the impact of the loss of family and social ties, and in some cases separation from their children and

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consequent concerns for their upbringing and education (and the consequences for the family group in which she carried out the task of caring for individuals with disabilities and dependence).

This type of research and comparative studies have been called “gender criminology” or “feminist criminology” and have highlighted the characteristics and factors associated with the involvement of women in criminal life and conditions specific to women whose punishment involves loss of liberty. Studies by [Giallombardo \(1966\)](#), [Carlen and Worrall \(1987\)](#), [Ward and Kassebaum \(1996\)](#), [Pollock \(2002\)](#), [Dobash and Dobash \(1992\)](#), [Jones and Newburn \(2002\)](#), [Jiang and Winfree \(2006\)](#), among others, highlight the different application of criminal policies in the application of punishments and in the treatment of men and women in prison.

While the General Prisons Act 1/1979 envisaged the creation of women only prison detention centres, i.e. that women prisoners are in separate units from male prisoners in prisons where men are in the majority. In the case of the Spanish prison system, the prison regime of the male prison population is mechanically transferred to the female prison population, regardless of the specific characteristics and needs of women. This comes into sharp contrast with the less dangerous profiles of women prisoners. For example, the percentage of women who are part of the prison day release scheme, the “third stage”, is 30.5% compared to 17.1% of men.

Recent statistics, as of January 2014, of the total prison population in Spain show that of a total population of 66614 people in the various Spanish prisons, 61565–92.4 % - are male and 5049–7.4 % - are female (General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions, Ministry of the Interior, 2014). Regarding the most frequent criminal profiles of Spanish women in prison, according to the Penal Code 1995, public health crimes exceed 1174 and crimes against property and public order amount to 1284.

The place of origin of these women is an important variable. Of the total, 3425 are Spanish nationals and 1624 are foreign nationals, mostly from Latin America. As a result a certain type of profile of women prisoners in Spain emerges: young, involved in offences against public health, and a high proportion of foreigners. As [Makin \(2013\)](#) points out Spain has one of the highest rates of women prisoners in Europe, 7.6%, according to the [International Centre for Prison Studies \(2012\)](#).

Moreover, it is interesting to note [Sudbury's studies \(2005\)](#) concerning the importance of gender and race in different prison systems throughout the world, as Spain is part of these global trends that reflect a greater specific weight of the presence of women in prison. Unlike male prisoners, the imprisonment of a woman has a specific character both in relation to her expectations as well as its most immediate effects ([Valverde, 1998; Aguilera, 2002](#)).

While studies have been carried out, these tend to present a very particular bias by focussing attention on aspects of maternity and health ([Cario, 1999; Campelli, 1992; Giallombardo, 1966](#)), which reinforces the andocentric models of professional intervention in the prison context. In this sense, one of the shortcomings that is notable is insufficient production of research related to the problem of women in prison from an interpretive approach to gender from analysis of professional practice.

While studies of the situation in women's prisons in Spain are not numerous, we highlight the research which [Almeda \(2001, 2002, 2006\)](#) carried out on women in Catalan prisons. These studies included both the perspective of women prisoners as well as the professionals themselves that have an impact on the need to design and implement specific treatment programmes that meet the needs of the women. Along this same line of investigation it is necessary to point to other studies of the Spanish prison system where the situation specific to women in prison is

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