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Gender, Prisons, and Prison History

NICOLE HAHN RAFTER

SINCE THE PUBLICATION in 1936 of Blake McKelvey's American Prisons (1972), social historians have developed a sizeable body of work that traces, and in some cases tries to explain, the evolution of U.S. penal institutions. These studies are important for what they tell us about perceptions of social problems in the past. They also have policy implications, indicating the historical roots of current dilemmas and alternative approaches to penal problems. Nearly all of these studies are limited, however, by their blindness to gender differences between prisons for men and women. Written mainly by men, prison histories have focused nearly exclusively on male prisoners. Perhaps their authors would argue that this bias is natural and insignificant since over time the vast majority of prisoners have been male. But by overlooking the variable of gender, prison historians have ignored an important influence on the nature and development of penal institutions.

Two of the most widely read social histories of prisons, David Rothman's Discovery of the Asylum (1971) and Conscience and Convenience (1980), illustrate the effects of this obliviousness to gender. The consequences are less pronounced in the earlier work because it deals with institutions founded before 1850, a period in which there was only one separate prison for women. Yet even

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here, failure to examine male-female differences causes Rothman to produce a skewed analysis. Describing the prototypical maximum security state prisons, founded in the early nineteenth century, Rothman writes, "The doctrines of separation [solitary confinement], obedience, and labor became the trinity around which officials organized the penitentiary" (1971: 105). Had he recognized that women as well as men were held in these institutions, and that the former often experienced a very different type of care (little separation, no supervision, and few opportunities to labor; see, for example, Martineau, 1838: 124~125), Rothman might have concluded that the discipline of male convicts was shaped by notions of masculinity—concepts of manhood and beliefs about what men (though not women) could endure.

Gender bias more seriously flaws Conscience and Convenience. a central thesis of which is that institutional reforms of the early twentieth century were characterized by a search for alternatives to imprisonment. To be sure, Rothman does argue that "innovations that appeared to be substitutes for incarceration became supplements to incarceration" (1980: 9). Yet his fundamental claim that Progressives energetically sought alternative solutions is contradicted by the fact that this was a period of enormous expansion within the women's prison system, one in which institutions were established at a faster rate than in any period up to the 1970s. Between 1900 and 1935, twenty prisons for women were founded from Maine to California, Nebraska through Arkansas,1 and the system of training schools for girls also developed rapidly (Reeves, 1929; Schlossman and Wallach, 1978). The huge investment of reformers' energies and of state funds in creation of penal institutions for females—at a time when their already low rates for serious crimes apparently underwent little increase²—suggests the very opposite of a search for alternatives to institutionalization.

Over the last decade, several studies of female institutions have appeared (Brenzel, 1983; Freedman, 1981; Rafter, 1983a, 1983b, 1985; Schlossman and Wallach, 1978; SchWeber, 1982), works that help reveal and correct the gender myopia of other accounts.³ In what follows, I first summarize some of the key differences between the development of state prisons for men and women, concentrating on the latter since their history is less familiar. Then I discuss differences between institutions that held black women and white women, differences that help sharpen our understand-

ing of ways in which perceptions of gender shaped institutions. After examining the influence of gender on institutions, I reverse the coin to look at effects of institutions on gender—at ways in which prisons have been used to punish and correct female deviations from prescribed gender roles.⁴ In conclusion, I discuss policy implications of gender differences for treatment of women held in prisons today.

But first, a word on terminology. "Sex" and "sex roles," "gender" and "gender roles," are terms that have changed meaning rapidly in recent years and may continue to do so. "Sex" is best reserved for reference to biological characteristics. These can affect prison treatment (for example, female prisoners have some special medical needs that, if unmet, can cause the level of care to fall below that of men); but biology is peripheral to the present discussion. I use "gender" to refer to socially ascribed differences between men and women, such as masculine and feminine traits. "Sex roles," in my opinion, muddies the distinction between biological and socially ascribed differences; I use "gender roles" instead.

HISTORICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEN'S AND WOMEN'S PRISONS

Directly after the Revolutionary War, states began assuming responsibility for the punishment of felons (i.e., serious offenders, in contrast to the misdemeanants and lesser offenders whose correction was left to local governments). Male and female felons were incarcerated together in the early state prisons. They received different care—generally women were less regimented and more neglected—but, relative to later divergences in the treatment of male and female prisoners, these differences were not marked. This situation persisted until 1870, when prison reformers throughout the country, embarrassed by the low quality of institutional care and the failure of prisons to rehabilitate, formulated a new approach to incarceration. Prisons, they decided at the first national meeting of prison administrators and reformers, held in 1870. should treat rather than punish. Inmates should be offered remedial educational, vocational, and recreational programs. And sentences should be indeterminate, so that prisoners would have an incentive for good behavior within the walls and the aid of supervision while out on parole (Wines, 1871).

In time, these principles of reform affected nearly all types of prisons (indeterminate sentencing became nearly universal in the early twentieth century, for example). But one of their immediate effects was creation of a new kind of institution, the reformatory, a prison designated for adult offenders under the age of 25 or 30. After 1870, states established reformatories for men and for women; however, in these institutions, significant gender differences began to emerge. Men's reformatories stressed vigorous exercise, training in occupations open to men, and the inculcation of "manliness" (which, it was supposed, would transform felons into responsible citizens [see Brockway, 1969: chaps. 18 and 19]). Women's reformatories, on the other hand, emphasized domesticity and training in femininity, on the theory that what was basically wrong with female criminals was their failure to be "true" women (see Welter, 1966⁵). The middle-class and elite women who led campaigns for separate, reformatory institutions for female criminals translated the principles of 1870 into a feminized version. Their efforts to realize the 1870 ideals were, in fact, more radical than those made at any institution for men, for in time the female reformers broke entirely with traditional conceptions of the prison.

Crusaders for women's reformatories surveyed existing prisons for adults and concluded that these were unsuitable for the care and treatment of women. In search of an alternative to the maximum security penitentiary, they turned for their model to institutions for juveniles. From the juvenile system they adopted the cottage plan, according to which institutions should be located in rural areas and consist of a number of smallish, homelike residences. The very first women's reformatories, like their male counterparts, consisted of large buildings in which all inmates resided; but by the 1890s, leaders in the women's reformatory movement had abandoned this congregate model in favor of the cottage plan, adopting even the latter's practice of placing a motherly matron in charge of each dwelling unit.

The cottage plan appealed to these reformers because it was congruent with what they conceived of as woman's nature—too passive to attempt escapes, impressionable and therefore in need of gentle discipline. Moreover, the cottage plan offered excellent

opportunities for domestic training, which the reformers came to identify as central to the rehabilitation of criminal women. In program as well as architecture, then, separate prisons for women began to differ dramatically from prisons for men. As in reformatories for men, inmates attended school for several hours a day; but most of their time was taken up by instruction in sewing, cooking, and waiting on table. At parole, many women were released to positions as live-in servants in homes where the *mater familias* kept a sharp eye on their behavior.

Predictably, these first women's prisons also developed new methods of discipline. Instead of the lockstep, some required decorous walking, with hands clasped behind the back. Their inmates, instead of being whipped (as were prisoners in the penitentiaries) or "paddled" (as were prisoners at Elmira, the first reformatory for men), were often punished by being sent to their "rooms" and denied supper. These were techniques used in training schools for juveniles. Indeed, infantilization was fundamental to the disciplinary methods developed by reformatories for adult women (Rafter, 1983a).

The major difference between women's and men's prisons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lay in their commitment restrictions. Men's reformatories, like all other state prisons for adult males, received only felons (see Rafter, 1983a: 308, n. 6). Women's reformatories, in contrast, received mainly misdemeanants and less offenders—violators of city ordinances against intoxication, women convicted of vagrancy, fornication, "lewd and lascivious carriage," and other offenses against public order. Men could not be incarcerated in state prisons for such behaviors. Creation of separate prisons for women thus was accompanied by legislative and judicial legitimation of the double standard that required women to conform to a more difficult morality. State criminal justice systems assumed responsibility for punishing women who failed to conform to prescriptions for the way proper women should behave. Like reformatories for men, women's reformatories adopted the indeterminate sentence; they, too, could hold inmates for flexible periods, typically up to three years (in New York at the turn of the century, up to five years). But because women could be subjected to such penalties for minor offenses, the result was harsher treatment for them than for men. For example, in Massachusetts in the 1880s, men convicted for a third

time of public intoxication could be sent to local jails for up to one year; women convicted for a third time of the same offense could be sent to the reformatory at Framingham for a minimum of one and maximum of two years (Massachusetts, 1880: chap. 221, sec. 2 and chap. 247, sec. 1). The reasoning that produced such disparities was straightforward: lapses in morality were more serious in women than men, and women, needing more protection, deserved more treatment. In states such as Massachusetts that established women's reformatories, beliefs about gender differences led directly to discrimination on the basis of sex.

The women's reformatory movement remained vital longer than most prison reform efforts, sustaining itself for sixty years. It collapsed about 1930, however, partly because it had been successful: separate women's prisons had been established in states throughout the country. Then too, the Depression spelled the end to funding of expensive, rehabilitatively oriented institutions for women who were, after all, minor offenders. Finally, the Progressive and social feminist impulses that had undergirded women's prison reform themselves died of exhaustion in the late 1920s. With demise of the movement, institutions that had been founded as reformatories began to change character. Some had held a few felons from the start, but most reformatory states had continued to maintain separate quarters for female felons within their maximum security prisons for men. About 1930, state after state closed down these units, transferring female felons to reformatory grounds. Simultaneously, courts began to sentence felons to the former reformatories. These institutions gradually filled with felons, and the less serious offenders were squeezed out; women's institutions that were established as reformatories came to resemble state prisons for men in the composition of their populations. In other words, women's prisons slowly relinquished the aim of punishing (or "treating," as the reformers would have put it) women for deviations from prescribed gender roles. But the women's reformatory movement left a tremendous legacy-a nationwide system of separate prisons for women. In addition, it bequeathed to current women's prisons its tradition of differential care based on gender. As recent surveys of women's prisons have demonstrated (Glick and Neto, 1977; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979; U.S. Comptroller General, 1980), these institutions

continue to emphasize domestic work and personal grooming, and to insist on conformity to stereotypes of the "good" woman.

The character of the women's reformatory movement accounts for most of the major developmental differences between men's and women's prisons—but not all. Some states (mainly in the South and West) never established reformatories. These left regulation of female public order offenders to local governments. However, they could not ignore female felons, whom they held in sections of their central prisons for men. When the number of felonious women became too large for their quarters (a point that, in date, varied widely from state to state), a separate women's unit was established outside the walls but nearby the men's prison. Usually this was supervised by a chief matron, but the matron was supervised by the warden of the neighboring men's prison, who also allocated supplies to the women and occasionally ordered his institution's physician or chaplain to visit the female institution. Women's units of this type seldom tried to provide more than custodial care. In fact, their inmates frequently experienced a level of treatment lower than that available at the neighboring prisons for men, for the latter consumed most of officials' attention.

Not surprisingly, these custodial units for women were more masculine in character than the highly feminized women's reformatories. Dependent branches of men's prisons, they replicated the latter in architecture (cellblocks rather than cottages), program (factory work and little else), and methods of discipline (see, for example, Goldman, 1931). Moreover, they held only felons, a type of woman traditionally regarded as masculine (see, for example, Lieber, 1964; Lombroso and Ferrero, 1915). Thus gender stereotypes influenced care in custodial women's prisons as well as in reformatories, but in the opposite direction.

DIFFERENCES IN THE TREATMENT OF BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN

This overview of the ways in which gender affected the evolution of men's and women's prisons obscures differences between prisons for black and white women, differences that further illuminate the impact of gender. The previous section indicated some of the basic differences between reformatory and custodial institutions for women. In the custodial units, black women often outnumbered whites. Even when black women did not predominate numerically, they were grossly overrepresented in comparison to their representation in the general population of the state. This generalization does not hold for the South in the antebellum period, when slaves were punished on the plantation by their masters more often than within prisons by the state governments. But in the South as in the other sections of the country, after the Civil War, custodial institutions for women were heavily, often predominantly, black.

In contrast, the populations of women's reformatories tended to be white. The three southern reformatories (in Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia) explicitly excluded black women; some northern and midwestern reformatories resisted such commitments. The mission of the women's reformatories explains their reluctance to receive blacks: these institutions were established to rescue and reform, to restore fallen women to true womanhood. Those who spearheaded campaigns for the establishment of women's reformatories, like most of those who later superintended such institutions, simply did not consider black women to be worthy of their rehabilitative efforts. The reformers' self-appointed task was to transform fallen women into women who would resemble—in manners, though not station—ladies like themselves. This was a transformation of which many considered black women to be incapable. (They were right, in a sense, for color and culture worked to exclude black women from the status of "lady.")

To portray the women's prison system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as bifurcated into two branches, one custodial and black, the other reformatory and white, is of course to oversimplify. Some reformatories—especially those least successful at excluding felons—had sizeable numbers of blacks; and even in the South, white felons could occasionally be found among the populations of women's custodial institutions. But insofar as the generalization holds true, it is useful in helping us understand the influence of gender on institutions.

How did this bifurcation by type of institution and race come about? In part, it was a product of the apparently higher rates of serious crime among black than white women: so far as I have been able to determine, from the earliest days of this country into

the present, black women have in fact been more prone than white women to commit felonies.6 (Indeed, it would be surprising to find anything else, given the circumstances under which black women came to the United States, their lesser chances for stable marriage, their migration northward after the Civil War, and their enormous economic disadvantages; [see von Hentig, 1942].) But the bifurcation was also an effect of screening; in all sections of the country except the West (whose only stable "reformatory" was established in the 1930s and held felons exclusively), judges, social workers, and administrators screened black women out of reformatories. Black women may well have committed misdemeanors and other petty crimes at rates similar to those of white women, but their morals offenses were more likely to be ignored. At the same time, white women were being screened out of custodial prison populations. If a white woman committed an extremely serious crime such as murder or arson, authorities felt compelled to act. But they tended to look for alternative dispositions, such as probation, for less serious white female felons. On the other hand, authorities had little interest in similarly filtering out black women convicted of the lesser felonies. This was especially true in the South after the Civil War, when the lessees who hired prisoners wholesale reimbursed states for the labor of female as well as male prisoners.

Beliefs about gender influenced these screening processes. Women were supposed to be delicate, shrinking, dependent, childlike, men to be strong, assertive, independent, and adult. But these formulas involved race as well as gender: it was easier for white than black women to be "womanly." In addition, criminal justice authorities found it harder to believe that white women would act out of role. These authorities perceived white women as unfit for incarceration in custodial prisons, except in extreme cases where offense type indicated the contrary. (For instance, during a prison investigation of 1870 in Georgia, a convict was asked whether "white and colored women mixed together" on a railroad work gang, to which he replied, "There were no white women there. One started there and I heard Mr. Alexander [the lessee] say he turned her loose. . . . He said his wife was a white woman. and he could not stand it to see a white woman work in such places" [Georgia General Assembly, 1974: 123].) For white women, then, gender interacted with race to keep their numbers in custodial prisons low. Black women, in contrast, were put at a disadvantage by both race and gender. Perceived as more masculine (Lewis, 1981), they were more readily sent to custodial prisons, institutions that were masculine in character.

The same factors affected screening in reformatories for women, but with opposite effects. These institutions, as we have seen, were dedicated to reinstating fallen women on the pedestal of true womanhood. White women were considered the best candidates for such treatment. By virtue of race, black women tended to escape the benevolent ministrations of the reformers.

EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONS ON GENDER

I have been discussing the effects of gender on institutions, but in the case of women's reformatories, at least?—the influence was reciprocal. Devoted to inculcating bourgeois standards of female propriety, the reformatories apparently achieved success with some, perhaps many, cases.8 Prisoner after prisoner went in as a "loose" woman and exited to make a "good" marriage or to become a satisfactory servant. After discharge, some women corresponded with the reformatories' matrons, proudly describing their upright families and homes. Others brought their families back to the reformatories for visits, as though to demonstrate their reformation. It seems likely that even those inmates who did not embrace the institutions' values would, after release, have been more cautious about engaging in the behaviors—saloon-visiting, vagrancy, fornication—that caused them to be imprisoned in the first place. Moreover, women who were never incarcerated but lived in the vicinity of reformatories must have been aware that immorality could result in confinement; they, too, may have been deterred from activities that were disapproved by the authorities.

At stake here, as I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Rafter, 1985: chap. 7), was public understanding of what it meant to be a woman. In the period spanned by the women's reformatory movement, gender roles underwent considerable upheaval. Workingclass women, having gained a degree (albeit marginal) of economic independence through employment in mills, factories, and restaurants, began to lead more independent social lives. To them. there was nothing shocking about visiting saloons or engaging in casual love affairs. They could be women without being ladies. But middle-class and elite women had a greater stake in Victorian definitions of womanhood. To be proper gave them status. Many, moreover, were vexed by the unladylike independence of servants who were saucy or frequented music halls at inconvenient hours. Finally, the way bourgeois women understood their own roles as moral guardians and bulwarks of domesticity was threatened by working-class women who took such roles more lightly (Schlossman and Wallach, 1978). For such reasons, some upper-class women undertook campaigns to establish reformatories that would encourage working-class deviants to conform to traditional definitions of gender.

Who won in this struggle? Earlier I argued that the institutions did reform some of their charges. Even if these successes were few in number, or temporary, or due in fact to other causes (such as maturing), it still remains true that in establishing and running reformatories, the upper-class crusaders won a symbolic victory. Their standards were promulgated by matrons who required decorous walking, taught table-serving, and censored mail from unsuitable correspondents. The victory, however, was not permanent. Increasingly, upper-class women themselves became independent, attending colleges, taking jobs, dressing more comfortably. As Victorian morality faded, so did the rationale for reformatories. By the 1930s, the "need" for reformatories had largely disappeared.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

According to every recent survey of women's prisons, these institutions fall well below men's prisons in the quality of care (Arditi et al., 1973; Bird, 1979; Glick and Neto, 1977; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979; U.S. Comptroller General, 1980). They provide fewer programs, and what programs are offered often function to reinforce traditional roles. Women prisoners have less access to lawyers, families, and friends. Whereas men's prison systems often include specialized institutions for the mentally disturbed, geriatric cases, inmates nearing release, and so on, most states run just one, unspecialized prison for women. In part, these problems are a product of numbers: there are so few female prisoners, relative to males, that states usually need only one institution for the former, and it is difficult for a single institution to run a wide variety of programs. But the problems are also rooted in gender distinctions: women's prisons offer courses in cosmetology (sometimes in little else) not only because these are cheap but also because it is assumed that women more than men need to pay attention to appearances. Moreover, correctional bureaucracies are staffed mainly by men; these officials are less sympathetic to the needs of female than male prisoners, and they tend to fund women's institutions last.

Over the last twenty years, female prisoners have started challenging inequitable treatment in the courts, demanding more and better programs, more pre-release opportunities, and an end to infantilizing forms of discipline. In some states, courts have ordered prisons to upgrade treatment of women (see U.S. Comptroller General, 1980: 8–12). Such decisions notwithstanding, equality is not just over the horizon. Faced with an overwhelming number of other problems, prison bureaucrats drag their heels about complying with the court orders. Moreover, so long as women continue to comprise only a small fraction of the prisoner population (currently about 4%), the problems caused by low numbers will not go away.

Finally, complete equality would not be entirely beneficial for women in prison. Prisons, I have been trying to show, do not exist in a vacuum but rather reflect gender differences in the broader society. Women (including prisoners) continue to be responsible for childcare, to be socialized to nonaggression, and so on. In addition, at least one study has found that female prisoners today tend to be somewhat conservative in their thinking about gender roles (Glick and Neto, 1977: 163-172). To attempt to eradicate gender differences within prisons when these differences persist in the broader society would be as pernicious as the reformatory movement's use of the criminal justice system to police conformity to gender roles. We should rather take advantage of current gender differences to minimize the social harms caused by prisons. Women are generally less violent than men, so why not advocate lower levels of security for them? Women have more responsibility for childcare, so let us support programs that increase their contacts with children. We can press for equality in numbers of programs without also pressing for identical programs. Gender has always influenced prison treatment; let us derive what benefits we can from this given.

NOTES

- Three of these Michigan's State Training School (established 1917), Washington's Women's Industrial Home and Clinic (1919), and California's Industrial Farm for Women (1919)—either never opened or closed shortly after opening.
- To judge from the continuing low numbers of women incarcerated for felonies.
- 3 Before the publication of Freedman's study (1981), the only book-length treatment of women's prison history was Lekkerkerker (1931).
- For more detail on the development of the women's prison system and substantiation of points made quickly in this article, see Rafter (1985).
- Welter's (1966) analysis of "the cult of true womanhood" stops at 1860, but 5 as I show in Partial Justice, the cult itself remained influential through the turn of the century.
- This statement is based on a survey of prison reports published from the late eighteenth century into the present, and on a study of the unpublished records of over 4,600 women incarcerated in five state prisons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Rafter, 1985; chap. 5). Also see Lewis (1981).
- I suspect that the influence of institutions on gender extended beyond women's reformatories. Arguably, the architecture and routines of men's prisons contributed to definitions of "masculine." Similarly, the nature of custodial women's prisons probably reinforced the perception of their female felons as more masculine than other women.
- 8 The degree of success depended on the quality of the institution—the dedication with which it set about realizing the aims of the reformatory movement.

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